

A Straight Goer

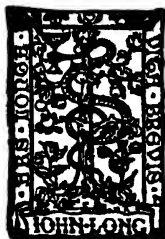
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By

Nat Gould

AUTHOR OF THE NOVELS FACING THIS PAGE

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A Straight Goer

CHAPTER I

A GIRL, A DOG, AND A MAN

"KOOLA! Koola! Koola! Come here this minute, Koola. Where have you been hiding? Hot, of course it's hot; is it ever anything else? Have you ever known what it is to be cold? No, of course you haven't. You've lived all your life under a blazing sun. All the same, Koola, there are cold places on this earth. I've read about them in books, and seen pictures of houses and trees all white. What do you think of that, Koola? Not brown, or dirty red, or green, but all white. Wouldn't suit you a bit, your colour's not the right shade. Come here, you naughty, ugly, disgraceful—dear old dog."

Koola crawled from under the verandah, where he had taken refuge from the scorching rays of the sun, stretched himself lazily, yawned, then with blinking eyes looked at the speaker.

Koola was a typical representative of his species—a kangaroo dog, big and powerful enough to tackle a man—or a kangaroo.

The speaker was a girl of some twelve years, and she stood shaking her finger at the delinquent she had been searching for during the last ten minutes. She had not the least doubt Koola had heard her calling him all the time. He had a habit of taking things leisurely; his movements were slow, even clumsy, when there was nothing particular on hand, in the shape of game. There was no slowness about him when the hunt was up, and the kangaroo flying with giant leaps and bounds for dear life. Koola was a different dog then, his reputation was at stake, he had to uphold his name, for was he not the "champion" of Dimboola station, and as such regarded with much respect by all his kind and divers bushmen of various nationalities?

"Koola, come here. You lazy dog, that's what you are."

Koola, in response to this command, sprawled on the ground, his strong limbs stretched out, and slowly shook his head.

Koola declining to go to the maiden, the maiden went to Koola.

Having conquered, the dog was satisfied, he received the caress bestowed upon him with becoming dignity. A pair of plump bare arms encircled his neck, a pretty face nestled against his massive head; then he was pulled over on to his side and sat upon.

"You may think you've got the best of it, but you haven't, not a little bit. I'm just going to sit upon you until you repent. When you show signs of sorrow I'll get up."

Koola wagged his tail.

"That's a sign of joy," said the girl, raising herself, and sitting down again heavily. Koola grunted; the pressure was responsible for this undog-like sound.

"I accept that as an apology; now you may get up," said his tormentor.

Koola sprang to his feet, shaking the dust from his body, then he rubbed his big head against the girl's hand. She patted him and they strolled away together.

They were constant companions, the big dog and the little girl, and a more faithful guard could not have been found for Madge Harvey, the pet of Dimboola station, and the tyrant of her father, Kenneth Harvey. Not that the girl needed much guarding, for there was not a man in the wild district in which the station was situated who would have hurt a hair of her head. There were rough hands on the stations in those days, men whose past lives would not bear too close an inspection, but it would have gone hard with any one of them had he forgotten himself so far as by word or deed to cause Madge Harvey a moment's uneasiness.

Madge and her four-footed companion wandered about in all directions; they were to be seen here, there, and everywhere. When she rode, and for a girl of her age few rode so well, Koola bounded along at her horse's side, his tongue hanging out, his eyes rolling, his whole body protesting against this exertion in the great heat, but he never gave in, or deserted her, no matter how far she went.

On this particular day it was as usual hot, but not so much so as to be unbearable. Sometimes the sun was so fierce that his rays scorched everything, and it was dangerous to venture out into the blazing light. There were very few trees about Dimboola, although at no great distance there was a mountainous country, where timber was to be had in plenty, where gigantic trees towered to a tremendous height, and where wonderful caves, and marvellous chasms, surrounded by tropical splendour, struck with awe and amazement people who beheld them for the first time.

A "no man's land" almost, when Kenneth Harvey came to Dimboola; it was scarcely to be called by any other name at this time. It was a dangerous country, its remoteness from civilization, its numerous fastnesses made it a safe hiding-place for men whose hands were stained by crimes and outrages against the law. Kenneth Harvey knew how to deal with such men when they crossed his path; his method was swift and sure, he took the law into his own hands.

When he came to Dimboola he brought with him half-a-dozen men he knew he could rely upon to stand by him through thick and thin. Four of those men died violent deaths at the hands of outlaws; two were still at Dimboola.

Kenneth Harvey only left the station once during the first ten years of his residence. He remained away some months; on his return he settled down to work in his usual style. Another ten years, or nearly

so, passed, and he went away again. Five years more and he left Dimboola for a year. On his return he brought a child back with him. This child was a girl, Madge Harvey, his daughter.

Nothing that Kenneth Harvey did surprised his hands, but they were slightly interested when he returned with the little girl.

He said she was his daughter; a statement unquestioned, but not believed, for no one had ever known him approach a woman, not even one of the half-castes of the district, during all the years he had been at Dimboola. They talked the matter over amongst themselves, but he heard nothing of it, nor would it have been well for them had he done so; he brooked no interference in his affairs.

Madge Harvey, after a five years sojourn at Dimboola, seemed part and parcel of the place, as much so as her constant companion Koola, who was regarded as the chief of dogs.

The girl and the dog wandered on for a mile or two when she sat down near the creek, where a few stunted shrubs and trees afforded some shade. Koola drank eagerly from the small trickling stream, and then sniffed round, satisfied that all was well, and there was no danger afoot.

Presently Madge fell asleep, and the dog stood guard over her. She often slept after a walk, the heat making her drowsy, and many a time had Kenneth Harvey found her thus, with Koola keeping watch. Next to the child, the dog was his most constant companion.

Madge slept longer than usual, and Koola, becoming restless, pushed his head against her, rousing her. She sat up, rubbed her eyes, and looked round bewildered for a moment, then said—

"Time to go back, is it? Very well, I'm ready; come along."

At that moment they were startled by a low cry, which seemed to come from down the creek a short way.

Koola growled ominously, and Madge placed her hand on his neck.

"I wonder what that is?" she said in the low tone she generally used when talking to her companion. "Shall we go and find out?"

She had very little of the timidity of a child about her. Brought up in this vast wilderness, amidst men and animals, she was so accustomed to various sights and sounds that she was seldom startled.

She walked down the creek, Koola at her side. They had not gone far before they heard the sound again. This time Madge knew it was the cry of a human being in distress. Perhaps some one on the station had met with an accident; that it was the cry of a stranger did not occur to her; no strangers came to Dimboola, at least so seldom that the arrival of an unknown man was an event to be talked about for days afterwards. She ran rapidly along, then came to a full stop. In the distance she saw a man, stretched on the ground, calling out, and waving his arms wildly. She was not alarmed, yet momentarily she hesitated, then as the dog darted forward she called out—

"Stop, Koola, come back."

The dog hesitated, he knew the man was a stranger; that might mean danger to his charge.

"Come back," she said in firmer tones, and the dog returned.

Again the man cried out, waving his arms. They went nearer, until at last Madge stood close to him.

"Who are you? What do you want? How did you come here?" she asked.

The man fixed his eyes on her with a wild look. The presence of the child seemed to quiet him; he glanced from her to the dog.

"What do you want?" she asked.

She had seen men dying of thirst, but this could not be the cause of his cry, as there was water in the creek, and he had come along the bank.

"I am ill," he said, with an effort. "Is there a house near here?"

"Yes."

"Then for God's sake, little girl, go for help."

He did not speak roughly, not like any of the men at Dimboola, she thought. He was not old, his clothes were not such as are usually worn in the bush. She remained looking at him wonderingly; it seemed to her almost impossible, hardly real, that such a man should be found in this place.

A faint smile crossed his face; he guessed her thoughts.

"Never mind how I came here," he said, in a low voice. "I am sure you will help me. You do not wish me to die?"

"Oh no, no!" she said quickly. "It is over two miles to the station, but we'll run all the way."

She was about to start, when she suddenly stopped, and said—

"What is the matter with you? are you hurt?"

"I'm dead beat, worn out, starving. I've been lost for days, weeks, I think, it seems like it. I'm——"

He collapsed, falling back in a dead faint.

Madge ran towards Dimboola, and Koola trotted at her side.

Kenneth Harvey saw them, and judging by her excited manner, wondered what had happened.

"There's a man down by the creek," gasped Madge. "He's dying. He asked for help. I've run all the way. Go to him, dad, go to him at once."

She sank into a chair thoroughly exhausted, and Kenneth Harvey stared at her in amazement.

"It can only be one of the hands," he muttered, in his careless way. "What was there to make a fuss about?"

CHAPTER II

A DREAM

"It is ten years to-day since Master Colin disappeared. He was a lad, he was, the best of 'em all. A bit wild, but none the worse for that in my opinion. I wonder what has become of him; and there's some up at the house have not forgotten him, you may stake your life on that. Why, it was only last week Miss Norah said to me, 'Peter,' she says, 'you have not forgotten Master Colin, have you?' She looked me straight in the face with her blue eyes, bless her, and before I'd time to answer, she says, 'No, I see you have not, neither have I.'"

"And what else did she say?" asked Jane Lostock.

"A lot more, but it all amounted to this, that she'd be glad to have him back again."

"And so would I," said Jane.

"You're right, my lass. It was sheer bad treatment drove him away."

"Then you don't believe he did what they say he did?"

"Forged his father's name? Never; Master Colin was not one of that sort."

"I wonder who did it?"

"That's more than I can say."

"How did it leak out?"

"That there'd been a forgery?"

"Yes."

"Don't ask me. There was a terrible row about it."

"Peter, I always think you have your suspicions," said his wife.

"Suspicious are best kept to one's self."

"Especially with men like Clarence Newly about."

"Hush, Jane, not a word about him."

Peter Lostock was head coachman at Woodsdown, the residence of Sir Owen Newly, and Jane, his wife, had formerly been lady's maid to Lady Newly.

Woodsdown was the country residence of Sir Owen, who was a well-known figure in the sporting world, and whose name appeared on more than one list of directors of important companies. He had carved out his fortune by dint of sheer hard work and application to business; some said, also, by being unscrupulous; but the successful man is always fair game to shoot malicious shafts at. It matters little for the purpose of this story how he came by his wealth, the main fact is that it

was solid, and had brought with it a title. What Sir Owen's business was no one exactly knew. He dabbled in many things. There was an unpretending building in the city, not far from the Bank of England, to which he regularly went, when in London. On the door was a small brass plate with "Owen Newly" engraved thereon.

Many people passed in and out of the building in the course of a week, some entered looking dejected, and came out joyous; others entered with a confident air and came out crestfallen.

City men passing the building glanced at it curiously; some of them knew that thousands of pounds changed hands in the house, others wished they could climb as Owen Newly had climbed, they would be no more particular about the kind of ladder used than he had been, providing they got to the top.

Sir Owen was a popular man, and Woodsdown a favourite house amongst certain people. On the racecourse he was generally credited with running his horses straight, and he was not unsuccessful.

Clarence Newly, his eldest son, was frequently in London, looking after his father's financial interests. He was considered level-headed, shrewd, keen, and having many wonderful schemes in his mind, which he brought to light from time to time as occasion required. He was Sir Owen's son by his first wife, and some years older than Colin Newly, who had disappeared, as Peter Lostock said, ten years ago.

The present Lady Newly was, or rather had been, a bright, lively, happy woman, until her son Colin was accused of forging his father's name. She would not believe him guilty, although overwhelming proofs were placed before her. Her persistence in his innocence, during these ten years, had not failed to influence Sir Owen; other things had also tended to change his mind somewhat.

Norah Marden was Sir Owen's niece, an orphan child of his only sister's, and had resided at Woodsdown since her childhood, and inherited a handsome fortune from her father when she came of age.

Norah was a firm believer in the innocence of Colin Newly, and this endeared her to his mother, entirely winning her heart. This was the family residing at Woodsdown when Colin Newly had been away ten years. Peter Lostock was not far out when he said to his wife: "There's some up at the house have not forgotten him." Only that morning Norah had reminded, if she needed reminding, Lady Newly of the fact that Colin had been away ten years.

They were in Lady Newly's morning-room when Norah broached the subject. They considered the matter calmly; at this distance of time Lady Newly was almost resigned to the loss of her son, but not of his good name; she never gave up hopes of clearing away the stain upon it. She was no nearer that desirable end now than she was ten years ago. Sir Owen, it was true, regarded Colin with more favour, but his argument was that as his son obtained the proceeds of the cheque he must have forged it. No one would be likely to forge a cheque and hand it over to another person who would thereby reap the spoils; that was a waste of talent and energy Sir Owen could not understand.

"Colin had the money, you acknowledge that, Ella," he said to his wife.

"He had the money, but he did not know the cheque was forged," she replied.

"My dear, you know nothing about business," replied Sir Owen. "He unfortunately got into a mess, and instead of coming to me he acted dishonourably. I am very, very sorry, for I was fond of the lad; he was our son, and you know how I love you."

"Yes, I know, Owen," she replied, "and I pray that some day everything will be made clear."

"Until your prayer is answered we shall remain in the dark," he replied.

Norah, after some conversation, remained silent for a few minutes, Lady Newly watching her with kindly eyes.

"You always liked my boy, Norah?" she said.

"Colin! Oh, yes, indeed I did. We were such good friends, and he is so different from, from——" She hesitated.

"From Clarence," said Lady Newly, helping her out of the difficulty.

"Yes, although I do not dislike Clarence; on the contrary, I cannot help liking him, he is so kind and considerate."

Again Lady Newly smiled as she thought—

"Clarence is a diplomatist, he controls his feelings admirably."

"I wonder where Colin is?" said Norah, asking the question for the hundredth time.

"Sometimes I think he is dead," replied Lady Newly. "I am almost sure he is or he would have written—at least, to me."

Norah shook her head.

"He was always proud, and hated injustice," she said.

"But he must have known I did not believe him guilty," said Lady Newly.

"The only thing I blamed him for," said Norah, "was going away without seeing you, without a word of farewell; that was cruel, he knew how you loved him. I do not blame him for going, not at all; on the contrary, I think he was right, but he ought to have seen you before he left."

"No doubt he acted hastily, and thought of it when it was too late."

"That may be so."

"I think he was fond of you, Norah?"

She coloured slightly as she answered laughingly—

"As a chum he was; we were much together."

Lady Newly sighed. At one time it had been the dearest wish of her heart that Colin and Norah might marry; now Clarence would probably win her, he was striving hard, although Norah did not appear to notice it.

"I wonder who forged the cheque?" said Lady Newly, half to herself.

"If I could only find out!" said Norah. "I have been trying in a quiet way ever since Colin left."

Lady Newly looked surprised as she said—

"I did not think you were so deeply interested in him."

"But I am, and after ten years I am more anxious than ever about"

"It, and something tells me I shall succeed before long. You will be happier if his name is cleared?"

"Indeed I shall. When the secret came out I felt I would give all I possessed to prove his innocence. It was a shameful thing to make it public. Norah, do you think Clarence had a hand in it?"

Norah Marden started, then said—

"You mean in making the story public?"

"Of course, you don't imagine Clarence had anything to do with the cheque."

"Oh, no; how could he? nor do I think he made the story public."

"Then who did?"

"We may find out in time."

"Ten years has gone by and we are as far off as ever," said Lady Newly.

Colin Newly, wherever he was, was fortunate in having his mother and Norah Marden on his side. They were both determined to prove his innocence, and ten years had not lessened their desire.

Peter Lostock, in a more humble capacity, was equally desirous of proving Colin Newly blameless. He had never forgotten the young master who had always behaved well towards him, far differently to Clarence Newly, who was haughty and inconsiderate. Peter disliked Clarence as much as he had liked Colin. He had suspicions, as had also his wife, but, as he remarked, they were best kept to themselves.

The morning after their conversation Lady Newly said to Norah—

"I had a strange experience last night. I distinctly heard a cry for help, and awoke with a start, when I recollected my dream vividly. I saw Colin lying on the sand in a desert, calling aloud for help, and a young girl, and a big dog, came to his assistance. How they helped him, or what happened afterwards, I do not remember, but I am sure Colin is alive, Norah, and I thank God for giving me this consolation."

CHAPTER III

"HE'S MINE, YOU KNOW"

"WHERE is he?" asked Kenneth Harvey.

"About two miles away, down the creek. Let me go with you," said Madge.

"Is it Harry, or Bill, or who is it?"

"He's a stranger."

Her father was surprised.

"A stranger! Are you sure?"

"Yes, I went up to him; he said he was dead-beat, starving, and he looked it," replied Madge.

"Not the first 'dead beat' we have had at Dimboola," thought Kenneth. "The last fellow I helped turned out a bad lot, they generally do."

"There's no time to lose," said Madge, who, having recovered from her exertions, was anxious to be off. "Let us take the buggy."

Kenneth Harvey shouted to a man in the yard, giving his orders, and in a very short time a well-worn buggy, and a pair of rough-looking, wiry horses, stood before the house.

"You'd better get up behind and go with us," said Kenneth to the man. "Madge has had a find; there's a stranger down by the creek half dead, at least he told her so; perhaps he's shamming."

"Likely as not," replied the man; "they're mostly frauds."

"Of course you never sham," said Madge, hotly, "not even when you're asked to get up on a buck-jumper."

Kenneth laughed; the man was not a good rider, and had shirked mounting a "tough un" on more than one occasion.

"She had you there, Mic," he said. "I'd advise you to hold your tongue when Madge is about."

Kenneth took the reins, and the horses started at a smart trot, which quickly developed into a sort of three-legged gallop, an easy-going pace.

"There he is," said Madge, pointing to the man who was still lying on the ground.

Kenneth pulled the horses up with a jerk and got out. He looked at the man's face as he lay on his back insensible.

"Poor devil," he said, "there's no shamming about him, Mic. How the deuce came he here?"

He bent over him, took out his flask, and held it to his lips, raising his head as he did so. The spirit revived him and he opened his eyes then groaned.

"Feel better?" asked Kenneth, but received no reply.

"He's too far gone to speak," he said. "Give me a hand, Mic, we'll take him home."

They lifted him into the buggy, propping him up with the cushions, and went slowly back to the station, where they carried him indoors.

"He's as light as a feather," said Kenneth. "It beat's me how he wandered as far as Dimboola."

Madge was greatly interested in these proceedings, so was Koola, who looked on with dogged solemnity.

Julia Hope, the housekeeper and general manager at Dimboola, came bustling forward. She was a brisk, active woman of five and forty, and had been at Dimboola ever since the arrival of Madge, in fact Kenneth Harvey brought her there when he returned with the little girl. It was not the first time she had attended to a half-starved wanderer; one or two poor fellows had been brought there to die, and she had done all in her power to lessen their sufferings.

She ordered him to be placed on the bed, and then looked at him closely.

"He's in a bad way," she said, "but he's younger than some of them—can't be over thirty, not much anyhow, that's in his favour, it's the old uns that peg out."

Julia was not a cultivated woman, but she had a heart and a will that are far too seldom found in the more highly educated members of her sex.

She was utterly unselfish, and if her tongue was sharp, she made up for it by good deeds. She was a favourite at Dimboola; all the hands thought a lot of Julia, and the more she scolded them the better they liked her, and chaffed her good-naturedly.

Kenneth Harvey handed the stranger over to her care and left the room; he had other matters to attend to, and he never neglected business.

Madge remained with Julia; she had a proprietary claim in the stranger. Had she not discovered him? been the means of rescuing him in the nick of time?

"So you found him, did you?" said Julia.

Madge nodded.

"He's not one of the usual sort," commented Julia.

"No," said Madge.

"You noticed that, did you?"

"Yes. He speaks differently to the other men."

"I daresay he does. Where was he?"

"About a mile down the creek, two from here."

"How came you to find him?"

"He called out."

"And you went to him?"

"With Koola."

"You're a brave girl," said Julia, admiringly.

"Am I? But there was no danger in going to him."

"Perhaps not, but there's plenty of people older than you who would have kept at a distance."

"What harm could he do me?"

"Bless the child, I don't believe the creature's born that would hurt a hair of your head."

"Except you, Julia, when you brush it and things get in a tangle," said Madge slyly.

"Say that again and your back hair can go uncombed for me," snapped Julia.

"But the knots do bother you a bit sometimes, Julia. It's not my fault, there's such a lot of it."

"So there is, my pet, and it's the loveliest hair in the whole wide world."

"I am afraid you haven't seen much of the wide world, Julia."

"Haven't I? You don't know half I've seen."

"But I know some; you told me. Wouldn't you rather be back on a sailing vessel than at Dimboola?"

"Lor' bless the child, no. There's no catch in being stewardess on a sailing vessel."

"But I thought you liked it."

"I had to like it, make the best of it. When you're cooped up in a small space for three or four months at a stretch it doesn't improve matters to quarrel with your surroundings."

"Then you don't consider you're cooped up here?"

Julia laughed as she said—

"There's too much space at Dimboola, it wants filling, that's what's the matter with it. A hundred square miles of land, with an odd man or two on it, cannot be said to be crowded out."

The man on the bed coughed, and Julia said—

"How do you feel? Better, I hope."

Madge stood up, and they both looked at him.

He laughed strangely, and his eyes roamed about wildly, then he waved his arms and called aloud for help.

"That's what he did down there," said Madge, pointing in the direction of the creek.

Julia looked serious; this meant delirium, fever, and goodness knows what else. There was no doctor within a hundred miles of Dimboola, but Julia Hope's experience had been varied, she was acquainted with most kinds of sickness. She had not been stewardess on sundry vessels for nothing, the knowledge she gained there often proved invaluable. During long voyages she had battled with serious outbreaks of fever, once with small-pox, and the skipper of one vessel vowed the bulk of his passengers would have died had it not been for the bravery of Julia Hope, for when the disease was at its worst, the doctor was down with overwork, and their whole safety depended upon her skill.

She knew the stranger was very ill, that he might become dangerous, that in any case it would be some time before he was able to rise from his bed. This would irritate Kenneth Harvey, who had never been ill, so far as he recollected, and who had little tolerance for what he considered a weakness in others.

The man cried out again, attempting to rise. Julia held him down until he became calmer, speaking soothing words to him which had the desired effect.

"You had better leave the room," she said to Madge.

"Cannot I help?" she asked.

"Not yet. Tell your father he is very bad; he may wish to see him."

Madge left the room, going in search of Kenneth.

Julia had various remedies always at hand; she kept them securely under lock and key in her own sanctum—the kitchen. This was

necessary, for when grog ran out on the station, as was sometimes the case, the men were not particular what they drank; on one occasion Julia caught one of them enjoying himself with a bottle of pain-killer, pronouncing it to be much better than O'Hara's rum.

After watching the man for a few moments, and seeing no movement, she left him to get a sleeping draught; while she was absent Kenneth Harvey entered the room.

"It's a confounded nuisance," he muttered, "he may be laid up for weeks."

Standing at the bedside he looked at the man curiously, recognizing he was not by any means an ordinary bush tramp, nor a station hand.

Julia returned with the medicine.

"What's the matter with him?" asked Kenneth.

"Fever, a bad attack."

"That means he'll be on our hands a week or two?"

"Yes."

"And he'll take up most of your time."

"Some of it."

"And when he's cured he'll turn out an ungrateful beggar like the rest of them."

"I don't think so, he does not look like it."

"What puzzles me is how he got to Dimboola."

"It would puzzle any one," she answered.

Kenneth smiled as he said—

"It is an outlandish place, is it not?"

"The end of the world, I thought, when you brought me here," she replied.

"And what do you think of it now?"

"I love the place, I'd be sorry to leave it."

Kenneth looked at her with a kindly light in his eyes as he said—

"You're a good sort, Julia, there's not many women of your stamp."

"You don't care for women, you are no judge."

"I cared for one woman, and she died; I shall never care for another. You've been very good to my little girl, I shan't forget it."

"She'd be a mighty bad sort as wouldn't be kind to Madge, heaven bless her!"

"It was lucky for me I came across you in Sydney," he said.

"And for me too, or I might have been tossing about in some old tub on the ocean all my life."

The man called out again, and moved restlessly on the bed.

"Hold him up while I give him this," she said.

Kenneth took the man in his strong arms and raised him.

"Drink this," she said, "it will do you good."

At first he refused, not knowing what she said, but she firmly persuaded him, and his confused brain at last succumbed to her influence; he drank the draught and in a short time fell asleep.

Madge crept in on tip-toe.

"How is he?" she asked.

"Hush!" said Julia, with her finger to her lip.

As they left the room she looked up into Kenneth's face and said—

"We must be good to him. He's mine, you know, dad; I found him."

CHAPTER IV

THE STRANGER

THE stranger had a tough struggle for life; had it not been for Julia Hope he would have died. For some weeks he lay in a dangerous condition, and Kenneth Harvey grumbled at the trouble he caused, but never in Madge's presence.

"Dimboola's a regular dumping-ground for these fellows," he said to himself; "I believe they tell each other what a fool I am."

All the same he knew this man was not of the "dumping" order, and he was curious to hear his story when he was convalescent.

That time came at last, after many weeks, and one evening the stranger, being in a talkative mood, Kenneth Harvey questioned him as to how he came to Dimboola. He refrained from doing so before, thinking the man was not in a fit state to answer.

Madge was in bed, sound asleep, tired out, after a hard day's riding about the country. She was not troubled with many lessons, all she knew her father had taught her, and he was not a strict master. She could read and write moderately well, but for a girl of her age she was decidedly backward. Madge, however, was quick and intelligent, picking up knowledge as it came in her way with very little trouble, learning also from nature many things no books could teach. "A wild thing," she would have been called in Sydney, or any other big city, but there was a charm about her that many a well-educated girl might have envied. She had grown to like the stranger during his long illness, and had talked to him for hours as he lay helpless on his bed. He showed how much he appreciated her kindness, and when his strength returned he told her stories of strange lands across the seas that thrilled her girlish heart. At last Julia interfered and insisted upon his resting; she had no desire to see her work undone by over-exertion.

Kenneth Harvey felt drawn towards the stranger he had so hospitably and timely entertained. Julia was surprised at the consideration he showed him, it was contrary to his usual custom. As for herself, she regarded this man with a motherly feeling, enhanced by the long battle she had waged with death on his behalf.

"I'm glad you are almost fit again," said Kenneth. "You have had a rough time, I didn't think you'd pull through."

The stranger was silent for a few moments, then he said with deep feeling—

"I shall never be able to repay you for your kindness. You have all been so good to me. I have been thinking what I can do, but I'm such a helpless sort of fellow, everything I handle goes wrong. Bad luck has followed me for years. Ever since I left England I haven't had a thousand to one chance of getting on."

Kenneth smiled; here was another of them who had come out to the colonies to "pick up gold," make a fortune in a couple of years, and failed, as hundreds of others had done.

"That's pretty long odds," he said.

The stranger looked at him inquiringly.

"A thousand to one I mean," said Kenneth.

"I merely used it as an expression; at the same time it has been really a thousand to one against me."

"What have you tried your hand at?"

"Many things. I've been a clerk in a store, in an auctioneer's office, in a bookmaker's place. I've been on a sugar plantation in Fiji—it nearly did for me—and I've been wrecked on an island in the Pacific, and had to hide for weeks from the natives. You may not believe it, but I have ridden horses in races, driven a coach, and tried the mounted police."

"And failed at everything?"

"Well, yes, I suppose I did, but it wasn't entirely my fault; you see I had not been brought up to take orders, I had been accustomed to giving them."

Kenneth Harvey smiled again, he was beginning to know his man.

"And you found taking orders from a confounded bully of a sergeant a bit beyond your capacity, eh! is that it? I know something of the ways of the mounted police; there's good and bad amongst them I grant, but the bulk of those in authority are not fit to handle cattle, let alone men."

"You are right," said the stranger. "I should have done well in the mounted police, if it hadn't been for the sergeant who had control over us."

"Then you threw the thing up and cleared out. Was the police the last thing you tried?"

"Yes."

"And what caused you to leave the force?"

"The sergeant bullied us until we could stand it no longer, so we drew lots as to who should tackle him. It fell to me."

"And you carried out your part of the contract?"

"I did, thoroughly."

"Good. Go on, I am anxious to hear what became of the sergeant."

"Oh, I didn't shoot him, although he deserved it, but I made him fight me."

"Good lad, capital!" said Kenneth, his eyes glistening.

"I asked him to remit an unjust punishment he had inflicted on one of us. He refused, and called me vile names. From words it came to blows. I struck him. At first he refused to defend himself, and ordered me to be arrested; not a man obeyed him. Then he saw he must fight, or be thrashed, no matter what revenge he took afterwards.

We fought, and the troopers stood round to see fair play. I am glad to say the sergeant received a hiding he is not likely to forget in a hurry. My heart was in my work, and I let him have it as best I knew how. He showed the white feather, and the fellows jeered at him. This roused what bit of courage he had, but it did not avail him much: My blood was up, I thought of the many indignities he had put upon me, and the remembrance added force to my blows. When he was knocked out they carried him into the station."

"And you, what did you do?" asked Kenneth.

"I got rid of my uniform, and made tracks for the country; that was the commencing of the tramp that led me to Dimboola."

"You must have had a bad time; this is not a country where food and drink can be had for the asking."

"How I lived I hardly know, but somehow I managed to scrape along until a lucky chance brought me here."

"If the police find you there'll be trouble," said Kenneth.

"Probably, and that is why I must leave here as soon as possible," said the stranger gloomily.

"That is the reason why you must remain here," replied Kenneth Harvey.

The stranger looked at him quickly.

"I mean it," said Kenneth, nodding. "Tell me where you were stationed, and the name of the sergeant."

"Abergyle, and the sergeant's name was Schaaf."

Kenneth Harvey started as he asked—

"Brian Schaaf?"

"Yes."

"I am glad you thrashed him, very glad; he is a brute."

"You know him?" said the stranger in surprise.

"I have known Brian Schaaf for years. He was stationed in our district at Moraine. He's an old bushranger."

"Then how did he come to get into the police?"

"On the principle of setting a thief to catch a thief, I suppose," said Kenneth. "Very few men know Schaaf was one of a gang who roamed this district thirty years ago, but I know it."

"Does he know you are aware of what he was?"

"No, there's where I may be useful to you some day. Schaaf joined the police in Victoria, this colony was not safe for him. When years had gone by he returned to New South Wales, and one or two clever captures, for which he got the credit and his men did the work, obtained him promotion. I can imagine how he abuses his position, and as I said before, I am glad you thrashed him. Abergyle, you said; that is over two hundred miles from here. You had a long tramp, and it's a desolate country."

"I walked a good deal farther than two hundred miles," said the stranger. "I fell in with a band of blacks on the march, they helped me along for a bit, but when I left their camp it must have been a long way out of the beaten track. I thought it safer to leave them, they seemed to be growing suspicious of me, and I had no wish to remain in their company longer than I could help it."

"They are not very desirable companions," said Kenneth, "although

they are not dangerous if left alone ; they don't cause me much trouble, they know better."

"You have taught them a lesson?" asked the stranger.

"I have, and they took it to heart. How came you to strike the creek leading to Dimboola?"

"Merely by wandering about, not knowing where I was going. I found water and kept close to it, that's about what happened. If I had to die of hunger, I did not wish to go raving mad from thirst."

"That was sensible at any rate, and by following the creek you came within reach of Madge and Koola."

"Shall I ever forget that? Not if I live to be a hundred. Your daughter's face looked like an angel's as she bent over me; it was the only gleam of hope I had had for many days. She saved my life, for I am sure I should have been dead in a few hours had she not discovered me."

"She doesn't forget that fact," said Kenneth, smiling, "and she claims you as her property. She says she found you, and means to keep you."

"She is your only child?"

"Yes. Her mother died in Sydney. I could not ask her to live in such a place as this, she was not meant for the life, but Madge loves it; you see she came here when she was very young, that makes all the difference."

"She is a beautiful child, I am sure she is very dear to you."

"She is the only being I care to live for," said Kenneth.

"Has she never been away from Dimboola?"

"No."

"How little she knows of the world and its troubles!"

"The less she knows the better," said Kenneth. "You have not found the world a very happy place to roam about in."

"Not for the past ten years. Before then life was different to me, I had almost everything I desired."

"That was not good for you."

"Perhaps not."

"I wonder if you would care to tell me why you left England; what induced you to leave comfort, perhaps luxury, for a hard, rough life? You must have had some powerful reason."

"I had."

"If it will help you in any way to tell me, do so; I promise you I will keep your confidence."

"I am sure of it. There is no reason why I should not tell you, and I have done nothing I am ashamed of," said the stranger.

CHAPTER V

HIS STORY

"It is ten years since I left home," the stranger commenced, "and during that time I have wandered in many parts of the world earning a living as best I could, but it was desperately hard work for a man brought up as I was. First of all, I will tell you why I left.

"My father is a rich man, a private banker, some people might call him a money-lender, but he does not belong to the class of men usually included under that category.

"At school I always had plenty of money, and when I needed any my mother sent it me. She is my father's second wife; he has a son by his first wife, and we did not agree very well. Living at Woodsdown, our home, was an orphan niece of my father's, Norah Marden. She and I were chums, always together, very fond of each other, and this I think caused considerable ill-feeling on the part of my half-brother, Clarence.

"When I left school I got mixed up with a rather wild set of fellows. My father was anxious for me to enter the army, but I had not much inclination that way. My half-brother was very clever in business matters, and took the bulk of the work off my father's shoulders, while I idled my time away at home, riding and shooting, and indulging in all country sports. I was a good horseman, am now I think, and sometimes I rode my father's horses in hunt races and other events.

"My half-brother strongly protested against this, saying I ought to go to London and assist in the business.

"Probably he was right, but he did not go the proper way about it to induce me to fall in with his views.

"Racing is an expensive game for a man, and for a young fellow of twenty dangerous, if he allows it to gain a hold over him, which was my case. I betted freely, sometimes winning, more often losing, and having to ask my father to help me. He was generous, but resented my frequent applications to him. At last his patience was exhausted, and he refused to let me have five hundred pounds that I required to pay a debt. Angry words passed between us, I am sorry to say, and I went to my mother, asking her to help me. She promised to intercede with my father if I gave my word not to bet heavily again, which I did. Next day I went away from home on a visit to a friend. While there a cheque, signed by my father, came for the amount I required. I cashed it and paid my debt, but did not write to thank him for it

immediately, as I ought to have done. The cheque was forged, and I was accused of the crime. You can imagine my feelings when I received a letter from Clarence telling me everything, at the same time stating that my father would naturally not take any steps against me, as he desired to keep the shameful matter a secret. He also said that my mother and Norah Marden had no doubt as to my guilt, the proofs were too strong. He asked me what I intended doing, said if I wanted his advice he would see me at the office, as my father had gone on the Continent, utterly disgusted at my conduct.

"You can imagine my feelings. I was proud, and the mere thought that my father, mother, and Norah Marden believed me guilty of such a despicable act stung me to the quick. I made a hasty resolve not to return home, and went to see Clarence in London. He was in the office and received me coldly. Angry words arose, and he said plainly that he did not believe me when I said I had not forged the cheque and knew nothing about it. I explained that the cheque was posted to me, and that I thought it came from my father. He laughed, and said that was a story no one would believe, adding that I might have had the cheque posted to me in order to avert suspicion. I could have struck him when he said that.

"If you did not forge the cheque, who did?' he asked, and to this I had no answer. He pointed out that I needed the money, had asked my father for it, and been refused. There was, he said, only one conclusion to draw, that I had been so hardly pressed for money that I had been driven to obtain it in this way. He put the matter so plainly that I saw I had no chance of proving my innocence to those I loved best, and I would not face them with such a black charge hanging over me. What was I to do? In my perplexity I asked Clarence this question, by so doing confirming his suspicions against me.

"He advised me to go away for a time, as my father was very much incensed against me, and there was no telling what he might do. He offered to help me, give me a couple of hundred pounds to go abroad with, until the affair had blown over as he called it. Foolishly, I accepted the money, and went to America without saying good-bye to my mother or Norah Marden. Many a time since then I have deeply regretted the hasty step I took. I ought to have faced the matter out, sure in my innocence. My flight, it can be called by no other name, would naturally lead to the conclusion that I acknowledged my guilt. My half-brother's sneers at my protestations of innocence drove me frantic.

"I took the money, as I have said, and left England. In America I had a rough time, after my money was spent. Eventually I shipped as a steward on board a vessel bound for Sydney. It would take too long to relate all that has befallen me during those ten years. I have been driven from pillar to post, sometimes almost starving, at others working hard at some uncongenial occupation in order to earn a living. The best place I had was in a racing stable at Randwick, near Sydney, with a trainer named Dixon. He took a fancy to me and helped me along. I met him in a casual way in Pitt Street, and taking my courage in my hands, asked him boldly to give me work. I said I could ride, was well educated, and if necessary could do his correspondence and

book-keeping. My 'cheek' he called it, seemed to amuse him and he said he would give me a chance. He did, and I remained with him until he got into trouble with the authorities. I am sorry to say he was not a very straight goer, but he was always kind to me. I rode in the gallops at Randwick, and after some time he obtained a license for me. I think, had he kept straight, I should have done well, but when he went wrong, owners and trainers fought shy of me as well, because I had been closely connected with him. It was after leaving Dixon I went up country, and eventually obtained a billet in the mounted police, which terminated as you are aware. Those are the main facts of the case; there is a lot more, spread out over ten years, as you may imagine, but it would not interest you, and it only concerns my troubles and trials.

"I may mention that my name is Colin Newly, and that my father is Sir Owen Newly. I have, however, generally gone under the name of Colin Newton, and prefer to do so still. You have been so kind to me that I have told you the whole truth, believing I can trust you."

Kenneth Harvey had not once interrupted Colin; he was deeply interested in his story, which somewhat surprised him.

"What do you think of it all?" asked Colin smiling.

"You want my candid opinion?" said Kenneth.

"Yes."

"Then I think you behaved like a stupid young fool when you left home," said Kenneth emphatically.

Colin laughed, he was not in the least offended, and said—

"I have often thought so myself, but what else could I have done?"

"Faced it out, discovered who played such a scurvy trick upon you. Had you any enemies?"

"I daresay I had, I was not very particular about offending people I did not like."

"Have you any idea who forged the cheque?"

"Then you believe my story, you do not think I did it?" asked Colin eagerly.

"No, I am sure you did not. I believe every word you have spoken, although, mind you, it is a most extraordinary tale; a man must have faith in you to believe it."

"And you have?"

"Most decidedly. I am not considered a bad judge of men."

"I am glad to hear this, it gives me hope that some day all will be cleared up at home, and that I can look my people in the face again."

"Have you ever thought who forged the cheque, and sent it to you, and for what purpose?"

"Many times, but I have given it up in despair. You see, I reaped the benefit, not the person who forged the cheque, that is where the difficulty lies. What possible reason could any one have for such a silly action?"

"I can only think of one person who had a reason for getting you out of the way," said Kenneth.

"You mean my half-brother, Clarence?"

"Yes."

"Naturally you would think of him, but I assure you he would not do such a thing. We were not particularly good friends, as I have

already said, but I am quite certain he would not stoop to be guilty of such a mean action."

"He might have wished to get you out of the way on account of the lady's preference for you," said Kenneth.

"It would not have been worth his while. She did not care for him, and he knew it."

"That would not improve his feelings towards yourself."

Colin, however, would not hear of any accusation against Clarence, such as Kenneth Harvey suggested.

"The whole thing is a mystery," he said. "One day it may be cleared up, but I doubt it."

"What do you intend doing now?" asked Kenneth.

Colin looked gloomy, the future was anything but bright. What was he to do?

"I hardly know," he answered, "but I must think of making a move soon, I have already been too long on your hands."

"You say you can ride, you have also been well educated, there ought not to be much difficulty about finding you a billet."

"Perhaps you will help me," said Colin.

"I'll do what I can," said Kenneth, with a twinkle in his eyes.

Here was the very man he wanted; a man who could ride was always useful, a man who could teach Madge as well was a marvel, not picked up every day in such an out-of-the-way place as Dimboola.

CHAPTER VI

THE OWNER OF DIMBOOLA

"STAY at Dimboola, help me with my work, give Madge a few lessons, make yourself generally useful, and I'll give you a fair 'screw,'" said Kenneth Harvey.

"You are making a billet for me," said Colin.

"I'm giving you a chance of making one for yourself. Will you take it?"

"If you really mean it, and think I can be of use to you."

"I don't often keep men hanging around who are of no use to me. I'll promise you one thing. If you don't suit me, after a fair trial, I'll tell you to quit," said Kenneth.

Colin laughed as he replied—

"I accept your offer, only mind you keep your word, if I don't come up to your expectations; remember I have not been used to station work."

"You have roughed it?"

"Yes."

"At Dimboola you'll rough it still more, I fancy."

"I can stand it."

"That's my opinion. I may as well tell you there's trouble brewing round here. There's a hot gang in the district, and for the past few months there's been a lot of horse-stealing and cattle-lifting. It may come to a fight," said Kenneth.

"If it does you can count on me."

"I shouldn't wonder if Schaaf is put on to hunt these fellows down; if he is he's sure to come here."

"It may get you into trouble if he finds me in your employ."

"I'm not supposed to know you have been in the police; in any case leave me to deal with him, I know how to manage such men."

When Madge heard that Colin Newtor, as he must be called for the present, was to remain at Dimboola, she was delighted.

"He will give you lessons in his leisure time," said her father, "and mind you pay attention to all he teaches you."

"Is he a schoolmaster?" asked Madge.

"Not exactly, but he knows sufficient to help you on a bit."

"Then I'll do my best," she replied.

Dimboola was a large station, some forty square miles or more in extent. Most of the land was fenced in, and Kenneth Harvey's energy

had made the place one of the best in the colony. For many years he had toiled early and late to improve his property, and few men succeeded as well as he had done. The hard rough life suited him. When he visited Sydney he was always glad to leave the town and return to the country. It was a journey of five hundred miles from Dimboola to the capital, and at that time the railway only extended to within half the distance between the station and Sydney. The nearest township was Moraine, about thirty miles distant, and all letters and goods that came by coach were delivered there. For the heavier consignments bullock-waggons and horse-drays were used, and these had to journey over the two hundred and fifty miles that lay between Dimboola and the nearest railway station at Crowhurst. There was a constant coming and going of teams between Dimboola and Crowhurst. The stores at the station were well stocked, and considerable judgment and foresight had to be exercised to keep the supply up to the mark, and equal to the demand. Kenneth Harvey dealt fairly by his hands. They were supplied with all they required from the stores and charged a moderate price. They were not allowed to run up big accounts, nor were they permitted to purchase more than a given quantity of liquor in a certain time. Drunkenness was an offence Kenneth Harvey declined to tolerate. He understood a man who went in for a downright spree, extending perhaps over a week, and then gave it up, and worked all the better for it; but he had no room for the habitual toper, or the hand who got drunk when there was work to be done.

"Have your spree and then settle down again," was his advice, and most of the men followed it.

The boundary riders' huts in various parts of the run were all in good condition. Lonely spots they were, calculated to drive a man into fits of melancholy if he did not possess a cheerful disposition. From time to time Kenneth Harvey visited them to see that everything was in order, and the men knew he was desirous of making them as comfortable as possible.

At shearing time there was a busy scene at Dimboola. About a hundred and fifty thousand sheep were shorn, and the men worked harder then than at any other time. Cattle-mustering was another exciting occupation in which Kenneth Harvey took an active part. His hobby, however, was horse-breeding, and already the Dimboola stud was famous. There were few better judges of horses in the colonies than Kenneth Harvey, who was one of the pioneers of horse-breeding out West. Hundreds of horses were reared at Dimboola, sent to Sydney, and many of them shipped to India for remounts. He also supplied the police with horses, and the best of them were selected for use in Sydney and Melbourne, as van and carriage horses. Thousands of pounds passed through his hands yearly, and people knew he must be a wealthy man. He was shrewd and careful with the money he made. Land near Sydney and Brisbane at that time was to be purchased at a reasonable price, and he made many investments.

At the time Colin Newton came to Dimboola, the owner of that station had become a power in the colony by sheer force of wealth and landed interest.

The manager of the Federated Banking Company, James Talent,

took good care to humour his best customer, Kenneth Harvey. Year by year the business of the bank increased, and it was Kenneth's money helped it along. He was a large shareholder in the bank, and whenever there were shares of the Federated Banking Company in the market, James Talent had a standing order to buy them for him. The manager was looking forward to the time when Kenneth would hold the bulk of the shares; he foresaw considerable advancement of his own interests in such a case. He transacted the bulk of Kenneth's business in Sydney, negotiated his land purchases, and arranged many important matters for him, for all of which he was liberally rewarded. It was Kenneth Harvey's influence that secured James Talent the coveted post of manager, so it is small wonder he was grateful. No one knew better the extent of Kenneth Harvey's wealth than James Talent, and it sometimes staggered him. If the money kept on accumulating as it had done in recent years, his patron would be far and away the richest man in the colonies.

Kenneth Harvey was aware of his power, he knew what money could do, for he had worked hard for it, and earned it. He despised a man who lived on money he had not earned, but he meant to use, in any way he wished, the wealth he had accumulated by his own industry.

"I have made my money, and I'll spend it or keep it, as I think fit," he said to James Talent. "Do you deny my right to do so?"

The manager knew better than to give a denial, but he ventured to say a rich man had many opportunities of benefiting his fellow men.

"You mean I could afford to give away thousands of pounds to keep a lot of loafers in idleness," said Kenneth Harvey.

The manager explained that there were deserving people who failed to get on in the world through no fault of their own.

"Find them, and I'll help them," was Kenneth's reply, "but they'll have to prove their case up to the hilt."

James Talent found here and there an isolated case, such as he had described, and Kenneth Harvey had been as good as his word. There was one man in Sydney, a member of the legislative assembly, who blessed the name of Kenneth Harvey, and knew him for what he really was. This man failed in business, in the city, through sheer ill luck. He was fairly cornered, hard up, without any means to support his wife and two children. He went to James Talent, whom he had known for some years, and explained matters. The case was placed before Kenneth Harvey, who sifted it thoroughly. Being satisfied, he started the man in business again, gave him capital, and set him on his feet. This time he prospered, and in due course repaid the money and became a free man again.

This was not an isolated case, as James Talent knew, and many a deserving man had received timely assistance from what Kenneth Harvey called his "give 'em a lift fund."

The men who tried to impose upon him, and there were many, received scant attention, they were sent about their business in remarkably quick time.

Kenneth Harvey was a discriminating giver, he had no desire to see his name in print, as the donor of thousands to some special fund.

What he gave he parted with freely, unostentatiously, and very often no one, except the recipient and James Talent, knew of the gift.

Some people called him a hard-hearted miserly man, without a spark of generosity, and this opinion, which he sometimes heard expressed, amused him. He had his defenders, however, and in Sydney there were men who mentioned his name with emotion, sometimes with tears in their eyes, as they remembered that if it had not been for him they would have gone under in the struggle for existence.

At Dimboola Kenneth Harvey was known by his hands as a just man ; they were also aware that he brooked no nonsense or disobedience. If one of his hands got into trouble "the boss" stood by him through thick and thin, and no man was ever sent away from the station without giving cause for his dismissal. His hasty temper sometimes roused the fighting blood in them, and then he heard opinions of his character that were the reverse of complimentary ; but when things had quieted down again he let bygones be bygones, and no more was said about it.

This was the master of Dimboola, a straight goer, a man who had fought his own battle in life, and reaped the reward. Idleness was to him an abomination, and had his wealth been doubled, he would still have continued in harness.

With such a man Colin was likely to get on, and it was a lucky chance that guided his wandering footsteps in the direction of Dimboola.

CHAPTER VII

JULIA'S ADMIRERS

MADGE was an apt pupil, eager to learn, grasping fast whatever Colin taught her. He was amused at his *rôle* of tutor to this young bush-bred girl, it was about the last occupation he considered himself fitted for. Nevertheless he was the right man in the right place, for he adopted a plan of imparting knowledge widely different to all known methods. Madge was not crammed, she learned thoroughly, and Colin explained everything he taught, to the best of his ability. Judging from the sounds of merriment, lessons were anything but a drudgery to Madge.

Julia Hope, as she heard the laughter, thought there was more play than work, but this was better than "cramming her little head with a lot of nonsense."

Julia liked Colin, perhaps her efforts to save his life drew him to her heart; anyhow, what little affection she could spare from Madge she transferred to him.

"He's a gentleman," she said to herself. "He's come down in the world, but that does not alter the fact. No amount of trouble and roughing it will ever rub the polish off him, and he's not only a gentleman to look at, he's the heart of one, he'd never do a dirty action, that's certain." It was Madge who introduced Colin to Julia's "special reserve," the kitchen.

She stood guard over this part of the homestead like a dragon, and even Kenneth Harvey seldom put his foot in the place.

"It's against the rules," she said, when Madge proposed to bring Colin in. "You know I never let the men come in here, they get in the way, and some of 'em are not at all particular about sampling things. If he comes in they'll want to come too."

Madge, however, had her way, as was usually the case, where Julia was concerned, and Colin was introduced into this "holy of holies."

He appreciated the cleanliness of Julia's surroundings; she prided herself on having everything spotlessly clean, and attributed her efforts to keep it so to the excluding of the male folk.

"If I had a lot of 'em tramping about there'd be no end of a mess," she said. "Men don't know how to keep their feet clean. If there's mud about outside they're sure to find it, and you'd be surprised the amount of earth a man can carry on his boots."

Colin laughed, acknowledging the truth of her remark, as he looked at his feet.

"I'll go outside and sweep some of the dirt off," he said, "or you'll probably refuse to have me here again."

"Oh, you're not so bad," replied Julia, "but your boots would be all the better for brushing, and that's a fact."

Colin chatted with Julia and Madge, telling them of his adventures abroad, and of his life at home, before he left to rough it in the world. Julia knew something of the county in which Woodsdoun was situated, and this proved a further bond of sympathy between them.

"England's a lovely place," said Julia, with a sigh. "I sometimes wish I'd never left it."

"There's no place in the world like Dimboola," said Madge. "You would not leave it if you could."

"Not while you're here," said Julia.

"Well, I'm not likely to go away, so you may consider yourself a fixture," replied Madge.

A black boy named Jimmy assisted her with her work. He was a handy youngster, full of mischief, and had been trained by Julia, who persuaded him to leave a camp of blacks, settled not far away, and try the advantages of civilization. At first she had a lot of trouble with him. Jimmy's thieving propensities were apparently inexhaustible; he was of an inquiring turn of mind, tasting everything eatable she happened to leave lying about. For purposes of correction, Julia kept a pliable willow with which she belaboured Jimmy freely, eventually impressing him to such an extent that he reformed.

Jimmy was a favourite with the hands. He was an amusing little fellow, and in the evening, when he escaped from Julia's clutches, the men taught him to dance, and learn numerous acrobatic feats, sometimes at a risk of breaking his bones. One day Julia was horrified, on entering the kitchen, to find Jimmy balancing himself on his hands, one on each chair, and his legs perpendicular in the air. He had not observed her entrance, and the attitude being favourable, Julia administered a couple of sound whacks which brought him to the ground.

"Who taught you such pranks?" she said angrily.

"Ben," replied Jimmy.

"Ben, was it? Then just wait until I see him, and he'll have a bit of my mind."

Ben received Julia's opinion of his conduct with a grin that exasperated her, and said she ought to be thankful to him for exercising Jimmy's muscles, as it would enable him to do a lot more work for her.

"I can exercise him without any help from you," said Julia. "He's plenty to do on his feet, without trying to work standing on his head."

"That's where you make a mistake, Julia," said Ben. "Work him at both ends and you get double the labour out of him, don't you see?"

"You're a fool, Ben Cridge," said Julia, "and you're not the only one on the place, there's several of you about. I wonder how the boss stands you; I'd soon shift a lot of you if I'd anything to do with it."

"No, you wouldn't, Julia, you'd never have the heart to do it. You know you're fond of the boys, I've heard you say so many a time."

"Fond of a pack of lazy, idle fellows like you? Not me, indeed. When I grow fond of any one he's got to be a *man*."

"Then you'd not be indifferent if a real man made up to you, Julia?" said Ben.

"Perhaps I should, and perhaps I shouldn't, it all depends on the sort of man," she replied.

"Julia, will you give me a chance if I try to be a man?" said Ben, laughing to himself.

"It's no use you trying, Ben, there's not the making of a man in you."

"Perhaps Tom would have a chance?"

"He's no better."

"Then give Billy a trial; you really ought to settle down, at your time of life."

"I'll settle you down if you don't clear out," said Julia, throwing a brush at him.

Ben dodged the missile and said—

"Remember this, Julia, whenever you're tired of a single life, think of me; I'm open to conviction. I don't know but what I'd go as far as to marry you, that is if you think it would do you good in any way."

Julia glared at him fiercely as she replied—

"It's such men as you, Ben Cridge, as makes a woman glad she's single."

Ben departed chuckling, and in the corner of the yard met Bill Blower.

"Julia wants you, Bill," he said.

"What for?" exclaimed the surprised Bill.

"Don't know; go and ask her," said Ben.

Bill Blower went to the kitchen door.

"What is there I can do for you, Julia?" he asked.

"Nothing; get out of this. Who sent you here?"

"Ben Cridge."

"Then go and tell Ben Cridge there's a pair of fools when you're together."

"Has he been riling you, Julia? Say the word and I'll punch his head."

"You punch Ben Cridge's head? I fancy I see you doing it," said Julia, with scorn.

"If he's put you out in any way I'll have a shy at it; you know I'd do more than that for you, Julia."

"I wish you men would leave me alone," she said.

"We can't, Julia, and that's the fact. We just can't leave you alone, we simply dote on you."

"Bill Blower, you're a bigger fool than I thought you were," she said.

"Think what you like, say what you like, but spurn me not; that I cannot bear."

"If you don't get out of this, I'll throw a bucket of water over you."

"That would not quench the fire of love," said Bill in melancholy tones.

Julia became exasperated. She flourished her fists in Bill's face, and bid him begone.

"Give me something to carry away as a remembrance," said Bill pathetically; "if it's only a cabbage leaf I'll be contented."

Julia smacked his face, and Bill danced round joyfully.

"I'll treasure that token of affection, Julia. How delicious are the smacks of love! Oh, Julia, you have a lovely hand, blessed is the man who can secure it."

This was too much for Julia. She seized a broom and commenced to belabour Bill with the handle; he ran across the yard and she followed him.

"Still running after the men, Julia," shouted Ben, and she turned her attention to him.

"You sent Bill Blower to me, did you?" she gasped.

"I did, with the amiable intention of giving him a chance. You declined my offer of an untouched heart, I thought perhaps you'd give him a chance."

Julia threw the brush at him; Ben caught it dexterously and said—

"Those dainty hands have often touched this handle, fondled and caressed it. Broom, you are to be envied. Would I were a broom!"

Julia burst out laughing as she said—

"You'll be the death of me amongst you. Can't you leave a woman in peace?"

"It wouldn't suit you, Julia, indeed it wouldn't. You love to be teased, all the girls like it. They tell me, Julia, that when you refused the skipper of the last vessel you sailed in, the poor man let himself down by the anchor-chain, dropped quietly into the sea, and was drowned in the waters of despair. Oh, Julia, you have much to answer for. What do you think happened last night?"

"How do I know? There's no telling what takes place with such a crowd of larrikins about," said Julia.

"In the dead of night a sound broke the stillness," said Ben solemnly. "We awoke with a start. Again the sound was heard. It came from Fred Dent's bunk, and we listened awe-stricken. Only one word came from his lips, but it echoed through the shed with a weird, awful sound. It was a wail of anguish, of a soul in pain, the last cry of a heartbroken man, calling, calling, calling in vain, upon his fickle, heartless Julia."

Ben slid off his perch to avoid the stone Julia hurled at him, and she heard him laughing as he disappeared round the corner of the shed.

Julia laughed too. She rather enjoyed these encounters; and after all, Ben Cridge was a downright good fellow, and often lent her a willing hand when she required help.

"They're a rum lot," was her comment, as she entered the kitchen, "but I don't think there's a bad 'un in the whole bundle."

CHAPTER VIII

PICKING A MOUNTAIN

JULIA HOPE's opinion that amongst the hands at Dimboola there was "not a bad 'un in the whole bundle" was, near the mark. They were a roughish lot, but kind-hearted to a fault, and Kenneth Harvey had reason to congratulate himself on his choice.

There was, however, one man who kept himself apart from the others, and seldom joined in their frolics. This was Joel Heath, who had been on the station about six months. Kenneth Harvey engaged him at Moraine, on the recommendation of Harry Ranger, who kept "The Digger's Rest," a popular house with the miners and bushmen. The Golden Lead mines were situated about six miles from Moraine, in the midst of a wild, mountainous country. They were for the most part owned by a syndicate, of which Kenneth Harvey was at the head. Adjoining the mine, which gave its name to the whole field, were several private claims owned by different individuals, most of them being worked to a considerable profit. The Golden Lead mine, however, employed the bulk of the labour, some hundreds of men, and the returns increased year by year. Joel Heath was a miner, one of the unlucky class, and he turned up his claim at Golden Lead in disgust, coming into Moraine in search of more profitable work. Harry Ranger promised to help him, and the first time Kenneth Harvey came to the township he asked him to find Joel Heath work at Dimboola. A hand or two more or less matters little, so Kenneth engaged him. The man turned out a good worker, but was unpopular with the men, owing to his silent, reserved nature. Ben Cridge expressed the opinion that he had committed some crime, which prevented him from joining in the pastimes of his fellow workers. He did not mention this in Joel's hearing, as there was an ugly look on his face whenever he was questioned concerning his reasons for holding aloof. With this exception, the hands at Dimboola were a jolly, devil-me-care lot of fellows, good workers, and always ready for a spree when occasion offered.

Much interest had been aroused by Colin's arrival at the station, and the men were more than surprised when they heard he was to remain there.

They soon found out Colin was a "cut above them," and at first were inclined to regard him in anything but a friendly light. Their feelings, however, quickly changed when he joined their circle at night, and entered heartily into all their amusements.

"There's nothing stuck up about him," said Ben. "I thought perhaps he'd want to boss the show, but he doesn't. I think he's a good sort; what do you say, boys?"

There was a chorus of assent, and Colin soon became popular. Kenneth Harvey advised him to make friends with the hands, which he was only too eager to do.

"They'll amuse you," he said, "and you'll find them a real good lot when you come to know them."

Colin tried to strike up an acquaintance with Joel Heath, but the man plainly showed he wished to be left to himself. He asked Kenneth Harvey the reason for his taciturnity, and he replied—

"He's one of the unlucky ones. He's tried most things and failed. He's about the only man who went into the Golden Lead who made nothing out of it. I think he's sick of the world and everything in it."

"I'm sorry for him," said Colin. "He must be miserable."

"Not a bit of it; leave him alone and he'll be contented."

Joel Heath was left alone, and hardly any one spoke to him, with the exception of Madge, who pitied, and tried to induce him to talk. She succeeded fairly well, and Joel Heath never shunned her company, but he could not be induced to talk about himself, even to her, and the reason for his melancholy he kept to himself.

Colin was anxious to try his skill on horseback. Ben Cridge was the best rider at Dimboola, and this gave him a standing amongst the hands that nothing else could have done. To ride well was the highest accomplishment, and no matter how good a man might be, he was not thought much of if he could not sit a buck-jumper, or clear a stiff log fence on some half-tamed horse. Ben Cridge was fearless on horseback, nothing daunted him, and he had taught Jimmy the black to ride, much to Julia's disgust. Jimmy's skill in the saddle attracted the attention of Kenneth Harvey, who had hinted to Julia that she had better look out for another boy, as Jimmy was too valuable to waste his time in the kitchen.

To this she gave an angry reply, saying it was not fair to take him away from her just when she had trained him to be useful. Kenneth laughed, and said she must blame Ben Cridge for it, adding that there were heaps more boys in the blacks' camp to be had for the asking.

"I'll send over and get you half-a-dozen to make a selection from," he said. "Jimmy's only one of a crowd, you'll never miss him. He's a light weight and useful to put up on some of the youngsters."

Jimmy, however, was still in the kitchen, although he escaped whenever possible, and made his way round to the stables.

Julia poured the vials of her wrath on Ben Cridge for tempting the boy away from her, but he merely answered, as Kenneth Harvey had done, that there were plenty more to be had for the asking.

The hands were all anxious to see if Colin could ride. Ben's opinion was that he looked as if he could, and that went a long way.

Kenneth Harvey advised him not to try, until he felt quite strong and fit to undertake a tough fight.

"They'll pick you a rough customer out, you may be sure of that," he said. "Have you ever ridden a buck-jumper?"

Colin confessed he had not, but said he had been on the backs of some very nasty-tempered blood horses.

"You'll find riding a buck-jumper different to anything you have experienced before," he said. "I'll give you a few hints," and he proceeded to do so.

One morning Ben Cridge had over a score horses in one of the yards, out of which he had to draft four or five to be sent to Sydney, after they were broken in.

Kenneth Harvey and Colin went to look at them. This was the first opportunity Colin had had of showing he knew something about horses.

As he looked through the fence he thought they were a rough lot, but his practised eyes quickly took in their good points.

Ben Cridge was in the yard driving them round, watching their movements closely, avoiding sundry kicks and plunges with dexterity.

"Have you made your choice yet?" asked Kenneth.

"I've singled three out," said Ben, as he pointed them out. "I want another pair; there's five to send up to Sydney."

"What do you think of his choice?" asked Kenneth of Colin, who said quickly—

"He's picked three good horses, but there's one over there I like better than any of them."

"Which is it?" asked Kenneth.

Colin pointed to a dark bay at the far side of the yard.

"You like him, do you?" said Ben. "As looks go, you're not far out, but he's an awful brute to ride. I've tried him; he's every vice under the sun."

"Tried him, have you?" said Kenneth, surprised. "When did you put him through his paces?"

"He came up with the last lot six months ago, and I tried him then."

"Not this time?"

"No. I don't suppose he's mended his manners."

"He looks good enough to try again," said Colin.

"Perhaps you'd like to have a go at him?" said Ben sarcastically.

"I shouldn't mind. Can you put a saddle on him?" said Colin.

"If you're going to try him, you'd better saddle him yourself," was the reply.

"You'll lend a hand, Ben?" said Kenneth.

"I've no objections, if he'll promise to mount him."

"I'll try," said Colin, who saw Ben had very little faith in his horsemanship, and hoped to give him a surprise.

"As likely as not he'll get you down and maul you," said Ben.

"I'll risk that. Give me a good whip, and I'll let him know who is master."

"You shall have my whip," said Ben, "you'll want it."

"Are you sure you are strong enough?" asked Kenneth. "I'm afraid you hardly know what you are tackling; if Ben's given him up as a bad lot you may be quite sure he's a savage brute."

"Take my advice and try something a bit easier first," said Ben.

Colin was on his mettle, and replied that he had not the slightest doubt he would be able to ride the horse, and master him.

"You'll want plenty of room," said Ben. "If you mount him in the yard it's as likely as not he'll smash your legs against the fence."

"We can have him outside, in front of the house, there's plenty of room there," said Kenneth.

"If he bolts I'll ride him to a standstill," said Colin, "that will bring him to his senses."

"You've got to get on him first," said Ben. "It will take three or four of us to saddle him."

Colin laughed as he said—

"I have picked a tough customer to try my skill on. If I'm thrown, I suppose you'll not give me up as a bad rider?"

"No," replied Ben. "I shall be surprised if he doesn't throw you. I don't mind confessing that he gave me a nasty fall, and I reckon I know how to ride."

"In that case, I shall not be discouraged if he gets rid of me," said Colin.

"When will you make the attempt?" asked Kenneth, smiling. He admired Colin's pluck, and hoped he would succeed.

"Any time you like, the sooner the better."

"Then we'll get it over and have done with it," said Ben. "I'll drive him into the shed and we'll saddle him, that will take some time."

"I'll lend you a hand," said Colin.

"Don't you bother," answered Ben. "You'll want all your strength for the struggle. I didn't think you meant business, but as you do, I'll see he's got ready for you. You're a good plucked 'un, at any rate."

"Is he a buck-jumper?" asked Colin.

"He bucks a bit, but not over much. I've seen plenty worse buck-jumpers; it's not that so much as the other tricks he gets up to. What he doesn't know in the way of roguery is not worth knowing. You'll soon find out his peculiarities. He introduces something new every few minutes. Just when you think you've fairly got him, he settles down for another fight on quite original lines. All I hope is you'll come out of it without any broken bones," said Ben.

CHAPTER IX

THE END OF A STRUGGLE

COLIN, stripped, and ready for the fray, watched the saddling process with interest. Ben had not underestimated the horse's temper when he said it would take some time to saddle him. As soon as he went near him the horse tried to crush him against the wall. They succeeded in bridling him, but there was a tough fight to put the saddle on. The horse kicked and bit at his tormentors, and it took half-an-hour before it was firmly fixed.

"He's a beauty and no mistake," said Kenneth. "Hadn't you better let Ben try him first?"

Colin did not relish his task, but meant to go through with it.

"I'll do my best to master him," he said. "I'm not easily frightened."

Several of the hands were about, eager to see how Colin shaped; they anticipated some fun, having been through the mill and knowing what was likely to happen.

Ben held the horse firmly by the head as Colin approached. No sooner did he place his hand on the wither than the horse squealed and lashed out furiously. Ben hit him over the head, quieting him a little, and he stood trembling as Colin approached him again. This time he was more successful, but did not succeed in mounting. When he had his foot in the stirrup, the horse swung round, almost throwing him to the ground. Ben held on firmly and kept him well in hand.

"Try again," said Kenneth, "you'll do it next time."

Madge stood on the verandah, looking on, encouraging Colin to "let the brute have it." Koola barked, and frisked round joyfully, eager for a gallop when the horse was mounted. The dog had taken a fancy to Colin, following him about everywhere, when he was not on guard with Madge.

Next time, Colin approached the horse warily until he stood close beside him; with a sudden movement he clutched the mane and the saddle, and sprang into the seat; it was cleverly done, and the men applauded. Colin gathered up the reins and shouted to Ben to "let go his head," which he did, jumping out of harm's way.

For a moment the horse stood still, then finding Colin firmly seated, he sprang into the air, all four legs off the ground, and arched his back until it seemed to come to a point in the centre. His head went down between his forelegs, and Colin held on with all his might. The horse

went forward with a quick succession of bounds, squealing all the time.

Colin had never felt anything like this before, the bucking was new to him, and he realised what it was to be on the back of one of these horses.

"Stick to him," yelled Ben. "Keep fast hold of his head."

Kenneth Harvey expected every moment to see Colin shot into the air, but he kept his seat, although every bone in his body commenced to ache.

The men cheered, they never begrudged encouragement when anyone showed pluck. Finding bucking no good, the horse changed his tactics. He whirled round and round like a top, and Colin reeled first to one side, then the other. The horse tried to bite his rider's legs, but heavy blows over the head stopped that little game. He reared straight upon his hind legs, pawing the air, coming down with a quick movement, and lashing out behind. He fell on his knees and tore at the ground in his rage. All this time the heavy whip descended upon his sides like a flail; the punishment was severe, and tamed his fiery spirit. He rolled on the ground. Colin slipped out of the saddle, cleverly mounting as he rose to his feet again.

"He's a rider and no mistake," said Ben, admiringly.

Madge clapped her hands joyfully, her hero was more than fulfilling her expectations; there was not a man on the station could ride better.

Baffled at all points, the horse seemed about to give in, when it occurred to him to bolt. Taking the bit between his teeth, he set off at a tremendous pace across the open ground, Koola tearing after him with long strides.

"He's in for a ten-mile gallop," said Ben; "that ought to take it out of him."

Colin knew his mount was not under control, but there was very little danger to be apprehended. The country was bare of trees, and there was ample space for the horse to gallop himself to a standstill. After the exertions he had gone through, it was comparatively easy work to sit still and let the horse go where he wished. It mattered little in which direction he went, there would be no difficulty in finding the way back to Dimboola. Mile after mile was traversed, and still the horse showed no signs of tiring. Colin began to wonder when the pace would slacken, they must have gone five or six miles at least. In which direction were they going? He knew nothing of the country, and therefore had no idea.

On went the horse, and Colin admired his long sweeping stride.

"He's a good one if he can be tamed," he thought. "Ought to make a steeplechaser if he can jump, and I expect he can."

A long way behind, Koola was toiling along; having come so far, he did not mean to give up the chase.

At last the speed slackened, and the strain on the bridle relaxed, the bit was in the horse's mouth again, his teeth had lost their grip on it.

"You've had your way, I'll have mine now," said Colin, and urged the exhausted horse forward. He felt him stagger, and swerve from side to side, and at last eased him, reducing the pace until it dwindled down to a walk.

The horse was quiet enough now, all the nonsense being knocked out of him, and he was only too willing to obey his rider.

"We've had a rough ride," said Colin. "We shall be better friends now, I hope."

He stroked the horse's neck, and was about to turn his head round toward home, when he heard a shout. Looking in the direction from where it proceeded, he saw four mounted policemen coming towards him. His heart beat fast; they might be some of his old comrades, if so, was Schaaf with them? They were a considerable distance away, and he was half inclined to set his horse going, and ride from them. A moment's reflection showed him this would be useless, for after his recent exertions his mount would hardly be able to raise a gallop; there was nothing therefore for it but to wait until they came up, and trust to chance.

One of the men waved to him, and Colin answered the signal. By this time Koola had come up, and lay panting on the ground.

As they came nearer, Colin recognised them. One was Sergeant Schaaf, the others, three of his men. Here was a nice predicament. Schaaf would be certain to arrest him, and there was no telling what might follow. He determined to put a bold face on, and if Schaaf attempted to arrest him, to appeal to the men.

Schaaf was the first to ride up, and stared at Colin in amazement.

"It's you, is it, my fine fellow?" he said. "This is a lucky find. I've been on the look-out for you for some time. What are you doing here?"

By this time the three constables had ridden up, recognised Colin, and nodded to him in a friendly way.

"That's my business," answered Colin.

"You'll soon find it's mine as well," said Schaaf hotly.

"May I ask what you are doing here," said Colin. "You are a long way from Abergyle. I don't suppose you'd come all this way in search of me."

"No, I didn't, but it's just as well I found you."

"And what are you going to do now you have found me?" asked Colin.

Sergeant Schaaf hesitated, he was in a bit of a fix. He did not know the country very well, and he was anxious to get on to the track of a gang of men who had lately stuck up the Abergyle mail, and made off with a considerable amount of booty. How many men there were in the gang he did not know, but from information received he thought there were three or four. It was, however, well known that in the mountainous district beyond Dimboola was a favourite haunt of several desperados, who made their headquarters there. Schaaf was spying out the land, seeking for information, learning the lay of the country, before he came in force to hunt the gang down.

Information had been received at Abergyle which roused Sergeant Schaaf to action. Two of the gang, who were supposed to be in the ranges, hailed from the Victorian side, and there was a big reward out for their captures. He meant to secure it if possible, and hence his increased activity and riding abroad. Perhaps this man, who had soundly thrashed him—Schaaf neither forgot nor forgave that—could

help him. He might extract all the information he could, and when he had no further use for him, arrest him, have him tried as a deserter, and also for assaulting his superior officer, a very serious matter indeed, for which severe punishment was meted out.

Schaaf changed his tone and his tactics.

"I suppose you know you are liable to be arrested?" he said.

"What's he up to now?" thought Colin, who noticed the new move.

"I suppose I am, but I fancy you'll think twice before you attempt it."

"Why should I?"

"In the first place, I have a good case against you for exceeding your duties in dealing with your men; in the second place, you would not care to hear my account of the thrashing I gave you made public in court, it would make spicy reading in the newspapers."

Schaaf winced, he recognised the force of Colin's argument.

"It is my duty to arrest you, but if you will give me your assistance I'll consider the matter," said Schaaf.

Colin looked surprised, wondering how he could help the Sergeant.

"Judging from your rig-out, I should say you don't live far from here," said Schaaf.

"Ten or twelve miles away," replied Colin. "I've just had a fight with this horse, and had ridden him out when I heard you shout."

"Where do you live?"

"At Dimboola."

"That's lucky!" exclaimed the Sergeant. "It's the place I am looking for. Mr. Harvey's the owner, is he not?"

"Yes."

"How came you to be there?"

"I was found nearly dead on the bank of a creek, a few miles from the homestead. I had a rough time after I left Abergyle."

"I dare say you had," grinned Schaaf. "Runaways generally have, it's part of their punishment."

"What do you want at Dimboola?" asked Colin.

"Mr. Harvey knows the district, and I want some information from him, that's all." He was not going to explain to Colin what his business was. "Will you show us the way, if you are returning there?"

Koola was growling at the heels of the Sergeant's horse.

"Call that brute off or he'll be kicked," said Schaaf.

"He's a wonderful dog, a splendid judge of character," said Colin, with a wink at the constables.

"He's ugly enough at any rate," grumbled Schaaf.

"And faithful. He'd never betray a friend," said Colin.

"Do you mean to insinuate I would?" asked Schaaf angrily.

"Oh no, I consider you're a model of all the virtues," said Colin sarcastically.

"Will you show us the way to Dimboola?" asked Schaaf abruptly; he was tired of the conversation which he saw his men enjoyed.

"I'll take you there," replied Colin, setting his horse in motion, and leading the way.

CHAPTER X

TOWARDS THE MOUNTAINS

WHEN Kenneth Harvey saw Colin returning with four of the mounted police, he was surprised, and, recognizing Schaaf, wondered if there would be trouble. He greeted them in a friendly way, saying to Colin—

"You mastered him, I see, and you deserve a reward for your pluck; I'll give him to you if you'll have him."

Colin was delighted, but hardly liked to accept the gift, he protested that he had done nothing to deserve it.

"But you have," said Kenneth. "I have seldom seen a finer display of horsemanship; I shall be surprised if Ben, or some of the boys, do not want to make a match with you."

"I'll take them on," said Colin, laughing.

Kenneth Harvey invited Sergeant Schaaf into the house, and the men went round to the yard, taking his horse with them.

Schaaf had not seen much of the owner of Dimboola, but knew he was a rich man, and a power in the land. It was always Schaaf's endeavour to try and keep on good terms with the big squatters and mine owners, he knew the value of it.

"You have not been as far as Dimboola before?" said Kenneth.

"No, I have only been stationed at Abergyle a short time, and there is plenty to occupy me between the township and Moraine."

"I'm glad to see you, anyway," said Kenneth, thinking of Colin, and desirous of propitiating him. "What brings you here?"

Sergeant Schaaf explained what had happened to the Abergyle mail, and said he wished to discover the haunt of the bushrangers.

"That's easier said than done," replied Kenneth. "They lie pretty close, and although their retreat is in the mountains, I do not know where it is, and it will be difficult and dangerous to hunt them out: you'll require more men than you have with you."

"This is merely preliminary scouting," said Schaaf. "I want to get on their track, and then I'll bring ten or a dozen men with me to ferret them out. Have you any idea how many there are in the gang?"

"No. I have seen nothing of them for some time, and they have let my stock alone for many months. I miss a horse or two occasionally, and have a good idea where they go, but so far my losses have been insignificant," said Kenneth.

"Two desperate characters from the Victorian side have come over here," said Schaaf. "They stuck up the coach, I am sure of it, from the description Jack Tipton, the driver, gave of them. The most desperate man we have had to deal with is amongst them, a fellow they call 'Captain' Donnell."

"I've heard of him," said Kenneth. "I believe he's a man of some education, which makes him all the more dangerous. By all accounts he has an interesting history; I think at one time he was in the army, was cashiered for some swindle he worked, and then commenced bush-ranging."

"That's correct," said Schaaf. "He's caused no end of trouble in Victoria, in the country between Melbourne and Albury, and several murders are put down to him; if he did not actually commit the crimes he was the instigator. There's a big reward out for him, and also for Jake Hayes, his mate. They have worked together for several years."

"I think you were in the force in Victoria, were you not?" asked Kenneth.

Schaaf started, then said—

"That is many years ago." He wondered if Kenneth Harvey knew anything of his early life; he did not care to remember those days, they were blotted out, or nearly so.

"So you think Donnell and Hayes have taken refuge in the Eureka ranges?" asked Kenneth.

"Yes, there is very little doubt about it. Where else could they go? It is the safest hiding-place, and most of the bushrangers are in league, and help each other."

"If they are there I may anticipate trouble," said Kenneth. "Captain Donnell is fond of horses, and picks out the best when he makes a raid. He'll find some good ones at Dimboola if he ventures here; he'll also find a warm reception awaiting him."

"You have some reliable men on the station, I suppose?" said Schaaf.

"Several. I may say all my hands can be relied upon; one of the best of them showed you the way here."

"I know him, Colin Newton's his name. Are you quite sure you can trust him?"

"Yes. Why do you ask?"

"Because he was one of my men at Abergyle, and he deserted; he's liable to be arrested, and he'd not get off with a light punishment," said Schaaf.

"He has told me his story," said Kenneth. "I believe you had a slight difference with him which ended in a fight."

Schaaf looked uncomfortable as he replied—

"He committed an unprovoked assault upon me; that is a serious offence, Mr. Harvey."

"He told me you fought, and he beat you."

"I had to fight; it was necessary to defend myself."

"There must have been some grave reason for his taking such a step, he's not the sort of man to desert his post without just cause."

"You are prejudiced in his favour," said Schaaf.

"Since he has been here I have grown to like him, and my little girl is very fond of him, which is a sure sign he's worthy to be trusted."

"Then you would be sorry to lose him?"

"Indeed I should; I trust there will be no necessity for you to take any action against him," said Kenneth.

"As I told him when we met, I ought to place him under arrest."

"But you will not."

"I must report the matter," said Schaaf.

"I don't see any necessity for that," said Kenneth. "He's settled down here, and is very useful to me, why not let him remain?"

"Do you wish it?"

"Most certainly I do."

"Then to oblige you, I will let the matter drop," said Schaaf, who at the same time determined to be even with Colin if a favourable opportunity offered.

"That's right, Sergeant. You have plenty of men, and he's of more use to me than to you," said Kenneth.

* The police remained at Dimboola for the night, and next day Kenneth Harvey, accompanied by Colin and Ben Cridge, rode out in the direction of the Eureka ranges. For some miles they passed through a succession of huge paddocks, in which hundreds of cattle and sheep were grazing. Sergeant Schaaf recognized that his host must be very wealthy to have such flocks and herds, not roaming at large, but kept within bounds. He had been on many stations, and on the majority very little fencing had been done, except round the run; there had not been much attempt to divide the land into conveniently-sized paddocks, such as he saw at Dimboola. It was in these paddocks that Kenneth Harvey kept the best of his cattle and sheep, from which he bred most of his stock; in the wilder country surrounding these enclosures great numbers roamed at large, and were only seen at mustering time.

Dimboola was not often short of water, for the river ran through the land, and although in times of severe drought it sometimes went down to a mere trickling stream, it was seldom dry. Water too was stored on the station. Huge tanks were erected in the paddocks, and also sunk into the ground in various parts of the run. As far as he was able, Kenneth Harvey went in for a scheme of irrigation, and when sheep were dying by thousands in other parts of the country, he often had grass sufficient to sustain life, if nothing more, at Dimboola. All this had cost time and much money, but he was amply repaid by results, and it would have been far better for the general prosperity had more squatters followed his example.

The horse-breeding paddocks excited Sergeant Schaaf's admiration. He had seen nothing on such a complete scale before. Kenneth Harvey was many years ahead of his time in this respect. Colin, too, was surprised at what he now saw for the first time, for he had not been able to get about much since his illness. He recognised a master hand had been at work, and began to understand what manner of man Kenneth Harvey was.

As they approached the ranges, and left the paddocks for the open country, the ground became rocky and uneven, the horses moving carefully, picking their way as they went. Ben Cridge led a packhorse

laden with the necessities for a substantial luncheon, and at the foot of the mountains, at the entrance to a gorge, Kenneth Harvey called a halt, and all dismounted, ready for some refreshment.

They had started early, and by this time the heat of the sun was almost overpowering.

"There's ample shade under those rocks," said Kenneth, "and there's a cascade a little farther on, round that bend. There is plenty of water now, for we had a splendid fall of rain a few weeks ago, and not before it was wanted; we generally get too much or too little, a deluge or a drought."

"Is this the entrance to the ranges?" asked Schaaf, who had noted many landmarks as he rode along.

"One of them, there are several, but this is the main track that leads through, farther West; there's a fine open country again beyond, almost right away to the Queensland border."

Men and horses were glad to be in the cool shade of the overhanging rocks, and Ben unpacked the "swag," and soon had a tempting display ready for them.

"You don't travel unprovided for," said Schaaf, smiling.

"When I have friends with me I like to look after their comfort," said Kenneth.

An hour was spent over luncheon, and then the men smoked and chatted with Colin and Ben, while Sergeant Schaaf and Kenneth Harvey walked along the path that led higher up the ranges.

"You'll be able to see the sort of country it is when we are at the top of the first range," said Kenneth. "It is not a long walk, and I'm tired of riding."

Sergeant Schaaf said he had no objections to stretching his limbs, and he was anxious to see the sort of fastness the bushrangers had selected for a hiding place.

The higher they mounted, the more he recognized how difficult it would be to capture desperate men in such a place, and this was the main path, which must be comparatively easy to the rougher, less frequented part of the ranges, where they had no doubt securely hidden themselves.

CHAPTER XI

"CAPTAIN" DONNELL

THE path wound in and out up the range, it was difficult for men to ascend, and for horses still more so.

When they reached the top a glorious view spread out before them. Range followed range, until the chain of mountains was lost in a luminous haze in the distance. Tree-clad slopes towered one above the other, a vista of undulating forest and deep gorges ran between each succession of hills.

Sergeant Schaaf was seldom impressed by his surroundings, but he could not fail to be so on this occasion. He looked at the scene with wonder, he had no idea there was such a magnificent spot within a few hours' ride of Dimboola.

"What do you think of it?" asked Kenneth Harvey.

"It's grand, but what a country to find men in, it seems almost impossible."

"So it is; unless they can be tempted to come out of their hiding place. Your best plan will be to watch various parts of the ranges to see if you can discover them when they leave their camp. It will be dangerous work, such men do not stick at trifles," said Kenneth.

"And when we have found them, the chances are we shall not be able to get at them."

"That remains to be seen, a few determined men can accomplish much."

Sergeant Schaaf found he had undertaken a more difficult task than he expected, when he decided to track the renowned Captain Donnell and his mates. This man had baffled every effort of the Victorian police to take him, and he was in a far more difficult country now. His reputation for daring, and foolhardy enterprises, was proverbial, and many a time had he only escaped in the nick of time by his skill and the connivance of friends. Kenneth Harvey and Schaaf remained on the top of the range for some time, and then slowly retraced their steps. They were unaware that a keen pair of eyes watched their movements, yet such was the case.

Securely hidden, not many yards away from where they had been standing, was a man. The bushes effectually screened him from view, and he had selected his look-out post with considerable cunning.

The man was Captain Donnell, and the arrival of the police party had been reported to him as they rode across the plain below. He

immediately went out of the camp to watch their movements, and saw Kenneth Harvey and the Sergeant leave the others and ascend the pathway.

James Donnell was a tall, good-looking, athletic man, from thirty-five to forty years of age. For ten years he had been the scourge of the whole country lying between the outskirts of Melbourne and the border town of Albury. His movements were so rapid that he was constantly appearing in widely separated places within a very short space of time. No sooner did the police hear of him in one township, and hasten to follow him, than they were told, on their arrival, he had committed a robbery miles away. Many a wild chase had he led them, laughing at their efforts. Strange to say, Captain Donnell was a welcome visitor in many settlers' houses. They knew him to be a desperate man, but he seldom robbed where he knew they could ill afford to lose; he confined his depredations to the rich squatters and to the numerous coaches and gold escorts. He had been known to render assistance to many settlers, and to take from the rich to give to the poor.

What had driven him to adopt a lawless life? Some said he had suffered unjustly, been accused of a crime he had not committed, and there were grounds for this opinion. He had held a commission in the military forces in Victoria, and been degraded, and dismissed, for falsifying the accounts of the regiment with which he was connected. He protested his innocence, but the case was proved against him to the satisfaction of his superior officers. He left Melbourne in disgust, and a year or two later the daring outlaw, Captain Donnell, was identified with the soldier who had been cashiered.

He was reported to be a wonderful horseman, and was always mounted on a swift, blood-like galloper. When he required a horse he levied toll on some squatter who bred on an extensive scale, and generally selected one of the best for his use. Numerous were the tales told of his exploits, some true, others much exaggerated. He laughed when he heard them, or read of them in the papers; and once he had the audacity to send a contradictory letter to a Melbourne paper, in which he strongly protested against the injustice done him, and explained what had actually taken place.

It cost the Government some hundreds of pounds in their efforts to hunt him down, and their patience becoming exhausted, a reward of two hundred pounds was offered for his capture; it was this caused him to leave Victoria, cross the border into New South Wales, and throw in his lot with the men who were known as the Eureka gang, from the fact that they had their head-quarters in the ranges of that name. He took with him Jake Hayes, a man who had followed his fortunes through good and ill, and who was devoted to him, as an ignorant man often is to one who has had a better education, and possesses more refined manners.

The members of the Eureka gang heartily welcomed such a leader as Captain Donnell. He assumed the command quite naturally, and no one murmured against it—had he not proved his fitness for the post by his daring? He was as well known to them as their oldest member, although only one or two of them had even the slightest acquaintance with him; to the majority he was a total stranger, except as regards his reputation.

He inaugurated his arrival in New South Wales by sticking up the Abergyle mail, with the assistance of Jake Hayes ; and Jack Tipton, the coach driver, vowed he had never met such “a darned polite robber” before. Jack was no coward, but had been glad to get off with a whole skin, and the loss of the contents of the mail bags ; there was only one passenger, and the robbers had not deigned to notice him.

This was the man who watched Kenneth Harvey and Sergeant Schaaf as they stood on the top of the range surveying the scene, and whose eyes still followed them as they went down into the hollow. Captain Donnell was well informed about such men as Sergeant Schaaf. Although he had never seen him before, he recognized him from the description given. It was the same with Kenneth Harvey.

On his arrival in the camp at Eureka ranges, he had learned everything there was to tell about the district, and its inhabitants, in the course of a day or two. He was told that Kenneth Harvey was a straight goer, a man who it was better not to meddle with, but who would not be likely to molest them unless interfered with. An odd horse or two mattered little to him, and he had so far not taken any steps to recover his losses, which were not great. Captain Donnell received a description of Kenneth Harvey, and at once recognized him as the man with the sergeant of police.

When they disappeared Captain Donnell crept out of his hiding place and walked to the top of the rock, from which coign of vantage he looked down on the party in the gorge below. To avoid observation he lay flat on the ground, and watched them with a smile on his face. He knew why they were there as well as if he had been told by Schaaf himself. They had come to spy out the land, and in due course an expedition of mounted police would be sent to scour the ranges. Let them come, they would find it a difficult matter to hunt the gang out, even if they found their place of concealment, which was highly improbable. He also knew Schaaf's history, as well as the Sergeant knew his (Donnell's), and he despised him for joining the police under such circumstances.

From what he had heard he was surprised to recognize Kenneth Harvey as Schaaf's companion. If the owner of Dimboola had not hitherto taken an active part against the Eureka men, it was evident he had changed his mind and was about to do so. The reason for this move he was not slow to guess. No doubt Kenneth Harvey had heard from Schaaf of the mail robbery, and of his (Donnell's) arrival in the district, and thought it better to throw in his lot with the police in consequence. This was a tribute to his reputation Captain Donnell did not despise.

As he was watching the party below he wondered how long it would be before Schaaf returned with a sufficient force to search the ranges. Abergyle was a long way off, there was no station near the ranges, except Dimboola, and therefore Schaaf would have to make that his head-quarters. He wondered if it would be better to attack Schaaf and his men at the station, taking them unawares, or wait until he could trap them in the ranges. In order to judge of this he ought to see Dimboola, and the audacious plan entered his head to pay Kenneth Harvey a visit. He laughed at the idea, it suited his nature, his love of excitement and

adventure. The owner of Dimboola did not know him, he could pose as a traveller seeking out the beauties of the country as he had successfully done before. Would this excuse be sufficient to throw dust in Harvey's eyes? He doubted it. He might go there as a buyer of horses; no doubt dealers and others made the long journey from Sydney and other places to see the famous Dimboola stud. It would be a new experience for him to purchase horses, he generally took what he wanted without payment.

When the party left the gorge, on their return to the station, Captain Donnell watched them for some distance, until they were almost out of sight, and then proceeded down the other side of the range towards the Eureka camp. As he walked along he turned over in his mind the plan he had hastily formed of visiting Dimboola.

It was the safest course to adopt, for he might find out what Schaaf intended doing, and when he was going to commence his search in the ranges. There was very little danger of discovery. His appearance was in his favour—always had been—there was nothing of the robber or bushranger about him. He had walked the streets of Melbourne safely, until his face and form became familiar to so many of the police—even then he had from time to time ventured into the city and not been recognized.

Sydney was new ground to him—he meant to try and explore it, before the hue and cry became too loud and the pursuit too hot. Perhaps if he visited Dimboola a chance of doing so might present itself, and if so he would not be slow to avail himself of it. He had plenty of confidence, courage, and resource, three attributes that had already carried him triumphantly through many difficulties.

CHAPTER XII

BLACK STAR

THE Eureka camp was a safe hiding place, and the men who occupied it were not at all alarmed at the prospect of Sergeant Schaaf searching the ranges with his troopers. It was situated in the middle range, difficult of access, there being only one path leading to it along which horses could travel. At the rear of the camp was a rocky footway, which at some time or another had been hewn out of the rock, probably by convicts who had escaped from Sydney and wandered thus far into the wilds. There were eight men in the gang, all wanted by the police, and as desperate a set as could be found. They were well mounted, and their horses had ample pasturage on the far side of the range, where the country was more open. There was also a goodly store of forage in the camp, which had been conveyed there under difficulties.

Since the arrival of Donnell, a passage had been discovered leading right through the main range to the open ground beyond. The entrance was covered with a dense mass of creepers and bushes, so that it remained unnoticed until accident revealed it to the Captain, who was fond of prowling about looking for unexplored caves, which might come in useful as hiding places in case of a retreat.

He stumbled across the entrance to this passage during one of his searches, and following its course for nearly a mile found it terminated at the foot of the range, at the other side, within a short distance of the plain beyond, which stretched out for miles until it reached the borders of Queensland. He saw the advantage the knowledge of this passage gave the gang. Horses could be led through it, and a small amount of labour would make the way easy to traverse. The gang were delighted at this find of the Captain's, and, following his instructions, soon had the road in good order. Its discovery made their hiding place more secure, as it afforded an excellent retreat in case the main entrance to the camp was blocked by troopers. They had no desire to be caught like rats in a hole, nor did they wish to leave their horses behind, as they would have to have done had the passage not been discovered.

When Captain Donnell joined them, he explained what he had seen, and said Kenneth Harvey had evidently thrown in his lot with the police. This caused savage comment on the part of several members of the gang, who proposed to make a raid on Dimboola before the Sergeant and his men took up their quarters there, for they agreed with the Captain that was probably what he would do. Donnell gave them

a hint as to his intentions, but all the men, with the exception of Jake Hayes, thought it would be too risky venturing into the clutches of Kenneth Harvey.

Donnell, however, laughed at their fears and said he should certainly carry out his plan. He was his own master, and no one dared interfere with him. If he returned it would be to their advantage, as he would be in possession of the plans formed by Sergeant Schaaf, or at least have a good idea of them, as he would no doubt impart them to Kenneth Harvey before he returned to Abergyle.

A few days after the visit of the police to the ranges Captain Donnell left the camp, and carefully leading his horse down the pathway, proceeded along the ravine until he came to the spot where the party had rested for luncheon. Here he halted, and examined the ground, thinking perhaps he might find something of interest. There was, however, nothing to attract his attention, not even a scrap of paper, and mounting his horse he rode out into the open country. He did not go direct to Dimboola, but rode round towards Moraine, deciding it would be better to approach the homestead from that quarter, in order to avert any suspicion that might arise as to whether he had come from the ranges. He was aware Kenneth Harvey was a shrewd man, and that he would have to be careful in dealing with him, to throw him off the scent. Donnell was mounted on a thoroughbred that had carried him hundreds of miles in all kinds of country. It was a black horse, with a white star, and he was appropriately named Black Star. Captain Donnell "borrowed" him from a squatter near Euroa in Victoria, and had been at some trouble in making the selection.

William Pierce, the owner of Karrimba station, near Euroa, was famous for breeding blood stock, and many horses from his stud had been good winners at Flemington, and at several up-country meetings. At this time blood stock breeding in the colonies had not attained the dimensions it has at the present day. Several good stallions had been imported from the old country, however, and were just commencing to build up the foundations of a breed of thoroughbreds that at this date can hardly be surpassed.

William Pierce was one of the first men in Victoria to import thoroughbred blood, as Kenneth Harvey was in the older colony of New South Wales.

Captain Donnell knew the value of the strain possessed by William Pierce—he had experience of it when he was in the army, and had also seen Karrimba-bred horses run at Flemington. He determined to get a horse from this place at any risk, and not to pay for it if he could help it.

For some months he hovered about in the Euroa country, keeping a watchful eye on Karrimba. He found it difficult to accomplish his purpose, for William Pierce kept strict watch over his blood stock. Sundry losses had made him cautious, and all the best horses were kept close to the homestead. Donnell found out that Pierce had gone to Melbourne, and hoped the vigilance would be relaxed during his absence. He found such was not the case, everything went on the same as if the squatter had been at home, a state of things Donnell appreciated, and at the same time chafed at.

Finding no opportunity of accomplishing his purpose by stealth, he resorted to strategy. In the first place he went to Melbourne, risked being recognized in the city, and sent a telegram to Euroa to be delivered at Karrimba. This telegram purported to be signed by William Pierce, and stated that a probable purchaser would call to inspect the stud, and remain the night.

This was not an unusual occurrence, for he often did a good deal of business in the horse line when in Melbourne.

Accordingly, when Captain Donnell rode up to Karrimba he was expected, and the stud manager at once showed him the horses without demur. The man quickly discovered the visitor knew what he was about, and was an excellent judge of horses.

"You pick out the best," said the man, laughing, "it's not the first time you have sampled a stud, I expect?"

"Not by a long way," said Donnell. "I'm fond of sampling, as you call it."

They came to a beautiful black three-year-old, with a white star on his forehead, and Donnell gave an exclamation of delight, launching forth in praise of the horse in unmeasured terms.

"He's the pick of the lot," said the man, "but he's not for sale. Mr. Pierce would not part with him at any price. He's out of the best-mare we have, and by the imported stallion Hercules; if ever there was a good one he's the identical. He's capable of winning a Melbourne Cup, I think."

Captain Donnell determined by hook or by crook to have this horse.

At night he sat up late with the man who had shown him round, and a considerable amount of liquor was consumed. Captain Donnell was capable of taking much more than his companion, and towards the small hours the stud manager was comfortably asleep on the sofa. It was a clear bright night, and Captain Donnell stole softly out of the room, patting the dog as he went on to the verandah.

Cautiously he looked round, and seeing no one about went to the stables. The black horse, he had ascertained, was regularly boxed, having been in constant work for some months with a view to racing him later on. This was in Donnell's favour, providing he managed to get the horse out of his box, as he would be fit for a long gallop, and before morning he would be far away from Karrimba.

He found the box without difficulty—the door was not locked—and entered quietly, speaking to the horse as it turned its head to look at the intruder.

A saddle was handy, and in a few minutes was firmly girthed on the black, the bridle he quickly slipped on to its head. His own horse must be left behind: it was not a bad one, but there was no help for it—he dare not take it with him.

Leading the black out of the box he went carefully across the yard, away from the house. The horse seemed quiet and had evidently been well broken in.

As they passed through the gate, a sudden movement on the black's part caused it to swing to with a clang, and a dog barked. There was no time to be lost. He sprang into the saddle and set the horse going at his best pace. Before any one was astir at Karrimba he was many

miles away. This was how Captain Donnell came to own Black Star, the horse he was riding towards Dimboola.

William Pierce had not forgotten the trick Captain Donnell played upon him when he stole his best colt. He gave every assistance to the troopers who tried to hunt Donnell down, and it was mainly through his influence the reward was offered for his apprehension, and he had been forced to flee into New South Wales.

Black Star proved invaluable to Captain Donnell, and a fleetier horse was not to be found in the country. Black Star's blood was of the stoutest, and at six year's old he could travel seventy or eighty miles, at ten miles an hour, with ease. He was also possessed of a wonderful turn of speed, and could jump any obstacle, no matter how formidable, that was a reasonable height. Captain Donnell regarded Black Star as his best friend, and horse and man thoroughly understood each other. No amount of money would have tempted him to part with the horse, and many a time had his life depended on its speed.

CHAPTER XIII

IN THE ENEMY'S CAMP

BEFORE he reached Dimboola, Captain Donnell met Colin Newton, who was riding round one of the home paddocks, looking at some cattle that were shortly to be sent to Crowhurs, there to be railed to Sydney. Colin was surprised to see a well-mounted man riding leisurely towards him, and wondered who he was.

Donnell reined up, and saw Colin looking admiringly at Black Star.

"Not a bad sort, is he?" said Donnell, smiling.

"A real beauty," replied Colin. "Thoroughbred, is he now?"

"Yes, and as good as he looks."

"Bred him yourself, I suppose?"

"No, I exchanged another horse for him," said Donnell.

"It must have been a good one."

"It was; but I had the best of the deal. Do you come from Dimboola?"

"Yes."

"Is Mr. Harvey at home?"

"No, he's ridden over to Moraine, but he'll be back to-morrow; if you wish to see him you had better remain the night with us," said Colin.

"Thanks, I will. I am on the look-out for a couple of good horses, and the Dimboola stud is famous. Has Mr. Harvey any to sell?"

"He's always open to make a deal," answered Colin, smiling.

"In that case I have no doubt we shall do business," replied Donnell.

"I am looking up some cattle; we are going to send a lot to Sydney, will you ride round with me?"

"With pleasure."

Colin liked the look of the man, he spoke well, and seemed affable and good-natured. Certainly no one would have taken this quietly dressed, gentlemanly man for a desperate character, a bailer up of coaches, a horse stealer, and cattle lifter, a man with a price set on his head. Donnell looked what he represented himself to be, a well-to-do traveller, anxious to purchase blood stock. As they rode round Donnell made shrewd remarks about the quality of the cattle, which proved to Colin he knew their value and which were the best.

"You breed cattle, I expect?" said Colin.

"No, I deal in them."

"Sydney side?"

"No, Melbourne; I have never been in Sydney."

"It's a fine city if a man has money."

"You've tried it minus the money, eh?" laughed Donnell.

"I have, and don't wish to repeat the experiment. I had a rough time of it before I came to Dimboola."

"Donnell looked at his companion and thought to himself—

"He's a Britisher, and a rattling good sort, I'll bet."

When they arrived at Dimboola, Ben Cridge came to take the horses, and as he took hold of Black Star's bridle he said—

"My eye, but he's a beauty."

"Glad you like him," said Donnell. "Got anything as good here?"

Ben was proud of the reputation of the Dimboola horses, and said quickly—

"Several; we don't keep anything hanging about here long that's no good."

"I'll have a look at them and judge for myself when Mr. Harvey comes home," said Donnell.

Although Ben had said there were several horses at Dimboola as good as Black Star, he doubted it.

He took the horse to the best box in the yard, and unsaddling him, examined him carefully from head to foot.

"Can't find a fault with him," said Ben to himself. "Wonder who he is, and where he picked this horse up, and if there's any more where he came from."

Seeing Bill Blower passing Ben hailed him, and when he came to the door of the box said—

"What do you think of this fellow?"

Bill criticised Black Star, ran his hand over him, stepped back and looked at him for a few minutes, then said—

"He's a stunner, as good as anything we have here, I guess."

"You've no occasion to say so, even if you think it," growled Ben.

"You asked my opinion, and you've got it. Who does he belong to?"

"A man who has just come up with Colin."

"Where did he meet him?"

"How the deuce do I know?"

"Picked him up in the creek, perhaps," said Bill.

"Bosh," said Ben, contemptuously.

"Found him in a paddock: perhaps he's lost his way."

"A man riding a horse like that lose his way!" exclaimed Ben. "You're a fool, Bill."

"There's a pair of us."

"I'd like to try him," said Ben.

"Worth riding, I should say," answered Bill.

"You bet. I'm game to wager he'd go a dozen miles without pulling up for a breather."

"More than that," said Bill.

"At racing pace, I mean."

"Maybe he would, perhaps we'll have the chance of seeing him do it. Can't you get a match on, Ben? Put Colin up to it, he's the one to draw him on—clever chap, Colin."

"He's a jolly good sort," said Ben, who regarded Colin with a sort of hero worship since he had tamed the fiery steed.

"Give him a hint," said Bill Blower, "there may be a sovereign or two in it."

"It won't be much of a catch," replied Ben, "this fellow's a bit too good; I'd sooner take something a bit softer on."

"Tearaway'd be good enough," said Bill.

This was the name Colin had given to the horse Kenneth Harvey presented to him. Ben shook his head as he said—

"He's not fit enough for a job of this sort. Look at him, he looks perfect, ready to run for a cup race," and he pointed to Black Star, who was quietly eating his oats. Julia appeared at the kitchen door.

"Wasting time again," she called out. "I wonder how the master stands it; it's lucky for you he's away."

"Come here, Julia," said Ben. "I know you like to see a good-looking one."

"Man or horse?" she asked.

"Well, there's me and Bill, not a bad pair, but it was the horse I alluded to. He's a perfect beauty. Have you seen the visitor?"

Julia's interest was roused. Colin and Donnell had not yet entered the house.

"What visitor?" she asked.

"The owner of this horse; he rode up with Colin a bit ago."

Julia crossed the yard in search of information, and to inspect the horse.

"Upon my word he's worth looking at," she said. "What's his master like?"

"As good-looking as his horse," said Ben. "You'll fall in love with him for certain."

"It's not the good-looking ones as is the best," said Julia.

"Then there's a chance for me," said Bill.

"I'm first on the list, aren't I, Julia, my dear?" said Ben.

"I came to look at the horse, not to listen to a couple of sillies chattering," snapped Julia.

At this moment Madge came running across the yard.

"There's a visitor come with Colin," she said. "Hurry up, Julia."

"Indeed there's no occasion to hurry," she replied. "He's only a man."

Madge laughed as she replied—

"But such a good-looking one; I had a peep at him as he came in—he's bigger than Colin, and he's such a jolly laugh, I heard it. My word, that is a beauty." She had just caught sight of Black Star, and the four stood looking at Donnell's horse.

Madge loved horses, and she patted Black Star's sleek coat, and caressed his neck; the horse calmly submitting to her inspection, still crunching his oats with evident zest.

While Black Star was undergoing this critical examination, Colin and Donnell entered the house. The Captain was amused at his reception; he thought how astonished his companion would be if he knew who he was. He had given his name as James Connor, which he considered as good as any other for the time being.

"I suppose my horse will be all right?" he said; "I generally look after him myself."

Colin assured him Ben would give Black Star every attention, but suggested they should go and look at him in his quarters.

Going round the verandah to the back of the house they saw the group assembled at the door of the box.

"The whole household has turned out to see him," said Colin, laughing, Captain Donnell joining in.

"Here's the owner," said Ben. "What do you think of him, Julia? You're a good judge, don't you know?"

"He's good-looking," she replied; "but I'd like to know who he is, there's so many rogues about the country now-a-days."

"He doesn't look like one," was Ben's reply.

"You can never judge by appearances," said Julia.

Donnell entered the box and spoke to Black Star, who neighed when he heard his voice. "He's holding quite a reception," he said. "Has he behaved himself?"

"Splendidly," said Madge. "He let me stroke and pat him, he's very quiet, and what a beautiful creature he is."

"Glad you like him, my girl," said Donnell, looking at Madge, thinking what a pretty child she was.

"This is Madge, Mr. Harvey's daughter," said Colin, by way of introduction, "and she is a young lady who must be obeyed."

"Keeps an eye on you all during her father's absence," laughed Donnell. "I am glad to make your acquaintance," he said, as he held out his hand.

"My father will not be home to-night," said Madge, "but we will try and make you comfortable, and amuse you if we can."

"Ask Julia to sing for you," said Ben, slyly; "she's a lovely voice, it's angelic."

"You hold your tongue," said Julia.

"But you can sing, Julia, I've heard you," said Madge.

"Julia Hope is our housekeeper," said Colin, "we should fare badly without her."

Captain Donnell gave her an admiring glance, which caused Julia some trepidation, as he said—

"In such company, with a lady like this to attend to our wants, I am sure we shall have a pleasant night."

"I'll do my best to make you at home and comfortable," said Julia, amiably.

Ben nudged Bill Blower, who could hardly restrain his laughter.

"Tuck him up well in bed," whispered Ben in her ear, "or he may catch cold."

Julia beat a hasty retreat, and Madge asked—

"What did you say to her, Ben?"

"Told her to air his bed well, and put a chair handy so that he'd not fall out if he happened to turn over."

"Silly man," laughed Madge. "You do tease Julia above a bit, but I rather think she likes it, Ben."

"Sure of it," he replied, laughing.

CHAPTER XIV

MAKING A MATCH

THEY spent a merry evening at Dimboola, Captain Donnell telling them tales of adventures which caused Madge and Colin much amusement—they little thought he was the hero of some of the yarns he spun. Kenneth Harvey returned home next morning, having started early from Moraine, and ridden the thirty miles within three hours. He never wasted much time, and rode horses that carried him well. He was surprised to find a visitor at Dimboola, but Donnell's plausible explanation easily accounted for his presence. Colin introduced him under the name of James Connor, and Kenneth Harvey had no idea he was entertaining the famous outlaw. As for Madge, she was delighted with the stranger, and told her father how he had amused them the previous night.

"So you have had your share of adventures?" said Kenneth.

"Most of the tales I told last night were related to me," he replied, "but I have seen a good deal of life in various parts of the colonies."

"You have a station in Victoria?" asked Kenneth.

"Only a small place, between Melbourne and Ballarat; I do a fair amount of dealing in horses and cattle, but do not go in for breeding, that takes too much capital; I am not a rich man, far from it."

"And you wish to buy a couple of good horses?"

"Yes."

"Thoroughbreds?"

"If possible, but I require them for my own riding."

Kenneth Harvey had seen Black Star and admired him; he thought it would be hard to find his match at Dimboola.

While Kenneth Harvey and the Captain were talking matters over, Colin was holding a consultation with Ben and Bill Blower.

Ben had approached him and suggested a match between Tearaway and Black Star, but Colin said his horse was not fit enough to tackle the black.

"I wonder if Black Star can jump?" said Ben.

"He looks as if he could," replied Colin.

"Why not try and match Maneroo against him, he can get over anything in reason; he's a splendid fencer."

"Yes, Maneroo's all right," said Colin, "but it would be hardly fair to ask him to risk a horse like Black Star over some of our timber."

"Why not?" said Ben. "He need not take it on unless he likes; if he does, then it's his look out."

"Maneroo is a trained jumper, that makes all the difference," said Colin.

"And Black Star has more speed, so that will make them equal," replied Ben. "Consider it over, there's no harm in mentioning it. We'll scrape up twenty pounds amongst us if you'll agree to ride."

"I think you can ride Maneroo better than me," said Colin.

"Not a bit of it. After what you did with Tearaway I'll take a back seat," said Ben.

Colin laughed; he fully appreciated Ben Cridge's opinion of his riding, and admired him for not being jealous.

"I'll see what I can do," said Colin. "There'll be no harm in mentioning the matter, and Mr. Harvey likes a bit of sport."

"He'll back you up, never fear," replied Ben, "and if Connor wants a bigger stake the boss will make up the amount."

Kenneth Harvey asked Colin to accompany them when they inspected the horses.

Captain Donnell was spying out the land, at the same time he looked over the horses; he saw it would be no easy matter to make a raid on the Dimboola stud, nor was he anxious to do so. He had taken a fancy to both Kenneth Harvey and Colin. The former he put down as a straight goer, the latter reminded him of his early days before he had been driven to take to the bush; he wondered how Colin would have acted had he been placed in a similar situation.

"That's Tearaway," said Kenneth Harvey. "He belongs to Colin, I gave the horse to him because he mastered him after one of the toughest fights I ever saw. The horse was a perfect brute a month ago, had almost every vice, known and unknown, but he's quiet enough now; he was conquered, but it did not knock the spirit out of him, he's plenty of that left."

The Captain examined Tearaway critically, saw he was a useful horse, and asked Colin how much he wanted for him, to which he replied that he was not for sale.

"We have plenty more," said Kenneth, "some better than Tearaway."

When they came to Maneroo Kenneth said—

"That's one of the best jumpers we have; I don't think there's a horse on the station to touch him at the game."

Maneroo was a powerful bay horse five years old, standing sixteen and a half hands, and Ben had trained him to jump as a three-year-old.

"He looks like a jumper," said Donnell.

"Is Black Star a good fencer?" asked Colin.

Donnell smiled as he said—

"I have never put him at anything yet that he refused, and he's had some stiff tasks set him."

"Would he take that?" asked Colin, pointing to a stiff three-rail fence, made of the usual rough hard wood, and firmly fixed with strong posts, that surrounded the paddock they were in.

"It's a stiff bit of timber, but he'll go over it, I'm certain," said Donnell.

"Maneroo can jump it easily," said Colin. "I think he'd prove himself a better fencer than Black Star, although he may not have the pace of your horse."

Donnell shook his head, he did not believe there was a horse to be found in the colonies as good as the black.

"If you fancy Black Star is better than Maneroo, why not match them? I'll ride him if you'll ride your horse," said Colin.

Kenneth Harvey laughed as he said—

"What do you say to that, Mr. Connor? It's hardly fair to challenge a guest in this way."

"I'm quite ready to make a match and a wager, if Mr. Newton wishes it," he replied. "I haven't the least doubt about Black Star winning."

"That's right," said Kenneth. "I like to hear a man back up his horse; but I may tell you, Maneroo is a tough customer to tackle, and Colin rides well."

"I flatter myself I'm a good rider," said Donnell; "and as for Black Star, he can jump anything and stay almost any distance."

A discussion took place as to the respective merits of the two horses, and eventually it was decided Colin should ride Maneroo against Black Star and his owner, a distance of about four miles over fences.

Kenneth Harvey's eyes sparkled at the prospect of a good race, and forgetting all about the selling of horses, he there and then proposed they should select the course.

Donnell laughed as he said—

"You are in a hurry, but the sooner we get it over the better; I can choose a couple of horses later on."

"What's the stake to be?" asked Kenneth.

"Suppose we say twenty-five pounds?" said Colin, thinking of Ben and his desire to have twenty on the match.

"Is that large enough?" said Kenneth. "If not I'll double it, and throw a good horse in as a trophy for the winner."

"That's generous," said the Captain. "Fifty pounds will suit me, and I shall win that horse, Mr. Harvey."

"Don't be too sure about it," said Colin, laughing. "If Black Star beats Maneroo you ought to run him in the Grand National Steeplechase at Melbourne."

"I think I would prefer to try at Sydney first, it is new ground to me, and I want to pay a visit to the city."

"Have you never been to Sydney?" exclaimed Kenneth.

"No, I told Mr. Newton last night I was anxious to do so."

"I have to go to Sydney in a week's time," said Kenneth; "why not go with me?"

Donnell chuckled to himself, it would be a good joke to travel to Sydney with the rich squatter, Kenneth Harvey; he pictured his surprise when he discovered who his companion was.

"I shall be delighted," he said, "but I cannot trespass on your hospitality for a week."

"Why not? We shall be only too glad of your company. In about ten days I expect Sergeant Schaaf and his troopers at Dimboola. They will make my place their head-quarters when they search the Eureka ranges."

Captain Donnell kept his countenance, not a muscle of his face moved, nor did he betray any undue interest in this announcement, which was to him of vast importance.

"Sergeant Schaaf?" he said. "Where does he hail from?"

"He's stationed at Abergyle. Dimboola is out of his district, at least it is supposed to be. Moraine is his limit, I think. He's on the track of a Captain Donnell and a man named Jake Hayes. They stuck up the coach not long ago, and Schaaf is almost certain they have taken refuge with a gang that has its hiding-place in the Eureka range. You can see the mountains in the distance. He was over here a day or two back, and we went there. It is a difficult country, and Schaaf has a much harder task than he imagines. I should not leave Dimboola if he was not coming over with his men, there's no telling when the gang may make a raid on my place."

"They have not molested you so far?" asked Donnell.

"An odd horse or two I have missed, that is all; but now this man Donnell is with them, there may be a change for the worse. He is a desperate fellow, I believe. There is a reward out for his capture, and Schaaf is anxious to secure——"

"Blood money," said Donnell quickly.

"Call it that if you like," said Kenneth somewhat surprised. "The reward is offered to rid the country of a scoundrel."

Donnell bit his lip, then controlling his feelings, said calmly—

"I suppose you have never heard anything said in Captain Donnell's favour?"

"No. What can there be in his favour, leading such a lawless life?"

"I hope you will not think any the worse of me when I tell you I know Captain Donnell. I knew him when he was in the Victoria forces; he was not always the outlaw he is now."

Kenneth Harvey looked inquiringly at the speaker as he said—

"Whatever he may have been there can be no doubt about what he is at the present time. You surely cannot approve of his actions; he is an outlaw."

"I don't say I approve of all he does, but what I do say is that a gross injustice drove him out of the army, and changed his whole nature."

"That is no justification for robbery and murder."

"Donnell never killed a man, at least never committed murder, I am certain of it. Had you known him as long as I have you would hold the same opinion."

"I like a man to stick up for his friends," said Kenneth, "but Donnell's life during the past ten years relieves you of any obligation to defend him."

Captain Donnell did not press the subject, he merely replied—

"I don't think Schaaf will find him in the ranges, he'll stick to the Victorian side until he is either shot or captured."

CHAPTER XV

THE CAPTAIN WINS

A COURSE to run the match over was selected, and included six stiff fences, over the four miles.

Captain Donnell recognized Black Star had a formidable task before him, but did not doubt his ability to accomplish it. His horse had jumped many a stiff fence when going at full gallop, and so far they had not had a spill.

● Colin knew Maneroo would get over the jumps, but whether he had pace enough was another matter. He thought, however, that the ground Maneroo would gain at the fences would make up for any distance he lost on the flat.

The hands at Dimboola were delighted when Ben Cridge told them the match was made, and he had no difficulty in raising the twenty pounds, which, with Colin's fiver, made up half the stake.

They were to race next morning, and Captain Donnell, the last thing at night, went to see if his horse was all right. Ben had attended to Black Star, and in the next box stood Maneroo, who was also stabled for the night. Ben came up as the Captain stood looking at his horse, and said—

"You'll have all your work cut out to win to-morrow. Maneroo is better than you think him."

"I hope it will be a good race," was the reply, "and that I shall win. I generally succeed when I set my mind on anything."

Ben imparted to his mates that he thought the owner of Black Star was over-confident.

"He makes cocksure of winning," he said. "Colin must take him down a peg."

"He'll do that, never fear," said Bill Blower; and all the men were equally confident.

Everybody was stirring early in the morning at Dimboola, for the race was to be decided before the heat of the day. It was cool and fresh, with a slight breeze blowing, an ideal day for the match. Madge was one of the first out, and as she went round to look at Maneroo, she found Colin already there.

He welcomed her with a smile, and in answer to her question, said he felt confident of winning.

Madge was all excitement, and Donnell was amused at the interest she took in the event.

"You are a regular little sportswoman," he said, smiling.

"I am. I love horses, and racing. We often have matches here, and all the boys ride well."

"My opponent better than any of them, I suppose?"

"Well, yes, I think so," replied Madge. "It will be fun. I hope you'll both come out of it safely; those rails are stiff things to get over, as you'll find out if your horse raps heavily."

"I don't think he'll do that, he's a rare jumper," was the reply.

Nearly all the hands were out to see the match, and they raised a cheer when the competitors appeared on the scene.

Colin had his ordinary bush clothes on, a red shirt and long trousers, without top boots. Captain Donnell wore a loose jacket; otherwise his costume was similar to his opponent's.

Both men were confident, and the critical spectators were unanimously of opinion they looked like good riders.

No time was cut to waste, they mounted their horses and rode to the starting-point, Bill Blower going with them to despatch them on their journey.

When he gave the word to go, Black Star took the lead, and Colin kept Maneroo well in hand on his track. As they neared the first fence Colin anxiously watched the black to see how he jumped. There was no hesitation about Black Star and his rider. Donnell set his horse at the fence, which he cleared in splendid style. Maneroo followed with a grand jump, gaining several yards. Colin saw he had a powerful rival to defeat. Black Star was a better jumper than he anticipated, and if he could beat Maneroo on the flat, the match was by no means safe. Colin knew the first fence was slightly lower than the others, and that the last was the worst of all, as it was on a slight rise.

The pace was fast. Black Star did not allow the grass to grow under his feet. Donnell thought his best plan was to tire Maneroo out. The stake of fifty pounds would come in useful. He had a fair supply of notes on him, but had no desire to part with any. He heard Maneroo galloping steadily behind him, and at the next jump forced Black Star ahead at a great pace. Again the black cleared the leap, although Colin thought not so easily as at the first jump. Maneroo flew it in fine form, landing well on the opposite side, in his stride, and not losing any ground.

The horses were now easily distinguishable from where the group of spectators stood, and the comments made caused some laughter.

Ben wondered why Colin was lagging behind when he ought to have Maneroo in front to cut down his rival.

"You're wrong there, Ben," said Kenneth. "It's far better to let Black Star make the pace, Maneroo runs all the better with something to give him a lead."

Madge was wildly excited, clapping her hands and shouting as they went over the third fence.

In the final mile were three stiff jumps, the last two being much closer together than the others, as only a small paddock had to be crossed.

Kenneth Harvey watched the race closely; he thought it the best bit of sport they had seen at Dimboola for many a day. He cared nothing

at all about the wager, he wanted Maneroo to win for the honour of the stud.

At the fourth fence Black Star made a clumsy jump, almost falling on to his knees as he landed. This caused a shout from the men, and Ben yelled—

“He’s beaten, Maneroo has him.”

“Not yet, not yet,” said Kenneth excitedly. “He hasn’t got on terms with him. By Jove! that was a splendid leap.”

Maneroo cleared the big fence in his stride, and Colin was now sanguine of winning. At the last fence but one the excitement rose to fever heat, and the men shouted and cheered so loud that they were heard by the riders. Maneroo had drawn up and was now close upon Black Star. Captain Donnell recognized there was danger, but knew his mount had plenty left in him. He determined to force the pace right up to the finish.

Approaching the next fence he held his horse well together, and fairly lifted Black Star over the jump; it was well done, and greeted with a cheer. Colin knew it was now or never, there was only one more fence, and Maneroo must hold his own or be defeated.

Over went Maneroo, fencing as well as ever, and again the men cheered, and shouted to Colin to come on.

Across the paddock they raced, Maneroo gradually drawing level with the leader, and for the first time Donnell felt uncertain of victory. Black Star, he knew, had greater speed than Maneroo, but the stiff fences had taken it out of him. He urged his horse forward, as he had done many times before under very different circumstances, when the troopers had been on his track, and he was flying for his life. He had beaten them, why should he not win now?

Before the last fence was reached the horses were level, and Kenneth Harvey said—

“They’ll take this jump together. I hope they’ll keep clear of each other, we don’t want a spill to spoilsport.”

They were neck and neck, within only a few yards of the jump, and as though by mutual consent they both pulled out, so that there would be no danger of a collision.

At a great pace, considering they were nearly at the end of the four-mile journey, they raced for the fence.

The slight incline told on the horses, and they laboured heavily. They reached the fence together, both rising at it at the same time. It was a fine sight, the two horses topping the stiff timber, their riders sitting firm, not a sign of hesitation, both eager to win. Breathlessly the men watched them, ready on the instant to cheer when Maneroo, as they fully expected he would, had the advantage.

The horses landed together, and a terrific race ensued over the last quarter of a mile to the winning point. Colin urged Maneroo on with sundry shouts and cries, such as are often used in the bush when riding horses, and Captain Donnell, following his example, gave several whoops that were distinctly heard.

It seemed as though the two horses would stick together to the end. They had jumped in grand style, and now they were finishing as only thoroughbreds can, and will. There was no flinching; although Black

Star possessed the greater speed, Maneroo's stamina was more than equal to that of Donnell's horse. This equalized matters, and made the struggle more even and exciting.

Madge's face was white, and she clenched her hands to keep herself quiet. Kenneth Harvey was roused to a pitch of enthusiasm seldom seen in him. Ben Cridge clutched Bill Blower's arm, squeezing it until the latter told him savagely to let go. Closer and closer came the well-matched pair, and still the issue was in doubt. Both men strained every nerve to win, rode their best, and the horses answered nobly to their calls.

Every yard was fought out, neither would give way; it seemed as though they would pass the post locked together.

"Come on Colin, now's your time," yelled Ben.

It was all very well to tell him to "come on," that was easier said than done. He knew Maneroo was doing his best, it was impossible to ask him to do more; he was also aware that Black Star had gained a few inches, and every fraction of ground was precious now, he must hold on to it to have a chance of winning. Hold on! How he tried to do it no one knew but himself. He pressed his knees firmly to the saddle, and tried to help Maneroo along, he urged him with his voice and hands, it was all to no purpose, for Black Star had the foot of his horse, and gradually gained upon him.

Frantic yells now came from the men, who saw victory slipping away from them. They called upon Colin to put on a spurt, make a rush, lift him forward, do anything to turn the tide in their favour.

Donnell felt exultant, the thrill of victory was upon him, he was certain of success, and he sent Black Star on again at headlong speed. It was a magnificent final effort, every one recognised it as such, and although chagrined at their defeat, they cheered horse and rider wildly, as Black Star came in first by a couple of lengths.

CHAPTER XVI

A STARTLING SUSPICION

LEAVING Dimboola for a time, it is necessary to learn how matters were progressing at Colin's old home in England. Clarence Newly made no secret of his desire to win Norah Marden for his wife. He proposed and was rejected, much to his disappointment, and also his father's, but Lady Newly was secretly pained at the result. She knew Colin, the long-absent one, had been very fond of Norah, and since his departure from Woodsdoun it was easy to see Norah missed him, and constantly thought about him. Lady Newly had very little doubt that if her son returned home, Norah would speedily show her preference for his society.

Clarence Newly had more reasons than one for wishing to marry Norah Marden. In the first place he liked her better than any woman he had met, and, what was equally important, she had money.

It would have surprised Sir Owen had he known Clarence, for some time past, had been in serious difficulties. Of late years Sir Owen had left the management of his business almost entirely in the hands of his son. This arrangement proved so satisfactory at first that he saw no reason to make any change. His income steadily increased, and everything appeared to be prosperous. For the last three or four years, however, Clarence Newly had been speculating rashly in his own name, and drawing large sums out of the business to meet his liabilities. He was elected a director of two or three companies, and rumours were rife that they were shaky, the capital of one company had been used to bolster up the shares of another, and in turn a third concern had been similarly supported. This was a dangerous game to play, as Clarence began to discover. Angry shareholders in the last companies demanded to know why their money had been used to support the first company, which showed no reasonable prospect of returning a profitable dividend.

Clarence Newly got deeper and deeper into the mire, until at last Sir Owen could no longer be kept in ignorance of the true state of affairs. He questioned Clarence closely, and found that some thousands of pounds had been drawn out to bolster up these speculative concerns. Sir Owen was very angry, anything that touched his pocket roused him to action. He examined his business affairs thoroughly, and discovered he would have to provide large sums of money to cover the heavy drawings of his son. Scenes, anything but edifying, took place in the sombre building near the Bank of England, and men as they hurried past commenced to look askance at it. Sir Owen's credit

was seriously shaken, and from the nature of the business he carried on it was absolutely necessary confidence in him should be implicit, as he often handled large sums belonging to his clients.

Although exceedingly angry with Clarence, Sir Owen did not as yet suspect him of underhand work; he believed his son's story, that all his transactions had been entered into with a view to benefit the business and reap large profits.

"You have pitted yourself against men much older and cleverer than yourself," said Sir Owen, "and the consequences are what might have been expected. Had you consulted me, I would have advised you how to act. When a speculation went wrong it was a suicidal policy to bolster it up with funds obtained for another company. Such a proceeding could only have but one result—failure. I have trusted you, and been deceived, and the liabilities you have incurred will drain my resources very considerably; it may be necessary to leave Woodsdown."

This announcement thoroughly alarmed Clarence, for there was more behind, and his father had not found out everything. He regarded the statement about leaving Woodsdown as an exaggeration, but it was necessary he should get money from somewhere. His father's private account at the bank was large, but he could not touch it unless—he dared not think of the rest—it meant forgery, and the punishment for that offence, apart from the terrible sin of defrauding his father, was severe.

Safety lay in one direction—towards Norah Marden. She had an ample fortune, why should he not marry her and save his face? He was conceited enough to imagine he had only to ask her to be accepted, and at last he made up his mind to put the question; the result, as we have heard, was a refusal, which much astonished him.

Why had she refused him? He asked this question over and over again, but found no satisfactory solution. She had always shown a preference for his society since Colin's absence; it was a good thing his half-brother was out of the way, probably dead, or something would have been heard of him. He never gave a thought to Colin, or the reason why he had left home. He was wrapped up in his own concerns, selfish, heartless, and unprincipled. He was so thoroughly self-confident that he considered himself capable of measuring swords with the shrewdest financiers of the time. He found he was mistaken; still he held on, putting his defeats down to ill luck, and not to his inability to cope with them and their methods. He imagined he saw through their moves, and acted upon this, instead of convincing himself as to facts. Speculation does not combine with imagination, what is required to be successful is hard stubborn fact.

It was most annoying that Norah should decline his proposal. She had resided at Woodsdown since she was a child; had been well cared for, treated as one of the family, and gratitude alone ought to have caused her to consider his suit favourably. This at least was his opinion, but it was not Norah's.

Since her conversation with Lady Newly, recorded some time ago, Norah had been frequently in the company of Peter Lostock and his wife. Peter told her to keep a silent tongue in her head, but Jane,

during his absence, was given to talk, and as she liked Miss Norah there was no difficulty in urging her on.

It was from Jane Lostock that Norah received a hint that startled her, although upon reflection she wondered why it had not occurred to her before.

In answer to numerous questions, on the familiar subject of Colin Newly's disappearance, and the cause that led to it, Mrs. Lostock had at last said—

"It's my belief Peter has his suspicions as to who is the real culprit, and although he keeps it to himself I can guess his thoughts, and I don't know but what I agree with him."

"You think Peter knows who committed the forgery?" said Norah. "If he does, it is his duty to speak out and clear Colin."

"He'd be only too glad to do that, Miss Norah," she said, "for he loves that boy as though he were his own."

Mrs. Lostock always alluded to Colin as a boy; she forgot the lapse of time and thought of him as he was when at Woodsdown.

"Then why does he not do it?"

"How can he? There's no proof, and nobody would believe him?"

"I think I should."

"Oh no, you wouldn't; but I am almost certain he's not far wide of the mark. If he didn't do it himself, he's the one put some one up to it," said Mrs. Lostock.

"Whatever do you mean?" said Madge.

Mrs. Lostock looked mysterious as she said—

"It's Peter's advice to keep suspicions to yourself, as they're dangerous."

"But you can trust me, Jane. Do tell me. I won't mention a word to any one."

"Not even to his mother?"

"No, not even to Lady Newly, at least until I am certain the suspicions are correct. If you tell me I may be able to find out. I want to clear Colin's name, and then I shall be satisfied. Think of the pleasure and relief it would be to his mother," said Norah.

"Aye, that's so, but it might cause much pain and trouble to others."

"Not more than it has already caused her."

"No, perhaps not," said Jane.

"You will tell me what you think?" said Norah, coaxingly. "You need not include Peter in the statement, we'll leave him out, and he need not know you have told me."

"He's sure to find out, he's such a one for dragging things from a body," said Jane, at which Norah smiled.

"He would not drag it from me," she replied, laughing.

"But you're not his wife; if you were you'd know how I feel when I keep anything from Peter, which is seldom the case, and then not for long," said Mrs. Lostock.

"I think you ought to tell *me*," said Norah, laying emphasis on the last word.

Mrs. Lostock looked at her and smiled, as she said—

"You have still got a warm corner in your heart for him, Miss Norah?"

"I have. I did not know how much I was attached to him until he left home," she replied rather sadly.

"She loves him," thought Jane, whose heart warmed towards her. "I hope he'll come back and claim her. I'm certain sure she'd have him. They'd make a bonny pair."

"You will tell me, won't you, Jane?" said Norah again.

"If you'll promise not to breathe a word about it, nor mention the name, or say anything until you are sure of your ground, I don't see as there'll be much harm done. After all you've a right to know, for I think you love Mr. Colin, bless him!"

At this point-blank thrust Norah blushed, but she said bravely—

"Yes, I do love him, Jane, and I don't mind telling you so. I love him for all he has suffered, and I love him for himself alone. I would tell him so if he came back, that is if I thought he wished it."

"Don't you have no fear of that, he'd wish it right enough," said Jane. "He'd be mighty proud to think such a beautiful lady loved him; but he ought to come back soon, we none of us get younger."

"I don't feel very old yet," said Norah, smiling.

"No, and you don't look it, but the best years of your life, and his, are slipping away, and you ought to be enjoying them together," said Jane.

Norah sighed; she wished it was as Jane stated.

"It may help Colin and myself if you will tell me what you know," she said.

"I don't know anything, mind; it's merely a suspicion, which perhaps I ought not to tell you," said Mrs. Lostock.

"Do please, there's a dear soul," said Norah, kissing her.

"After that I can't refuse," said Jane delighted. Then coming nearer, and looking round as she advanced, she whispered—

"It's Mr. Clarence we think might have done it; he always wanted to get rid of Mr. Colin, anybody could see that."

CHAPTER XVII

COLIN CLEARED

NORAH was startled at the communication made to her by Jane Lostock. It seemed a monstrous accusation to bring against Clarence, yet when she thought it over she was more than half convinced there was some truth in it.

Clarence had never been on very friendly terms with Colin, and she remembered how he behaved when he disappeared, hardly attempting to conceal his satisfaction, and saying it was the only way out of the difficulty.

Then she thought of Clarence in connection with herself. He had been jealous of her preference for Colin's society, there was no doubt about that, and since he had been away his attentions to her were unmistakable. There was something about him she could not understand, he always appeared to have some trouble on his mind. Sir Owen had been so incensed at Clarence's conduct that he had poured out his troubles to Lady Newly, who in turn confided them to Norah.

She began to see the reason for Clarence's desire to marry her, he was in want of money, and her wealth would be useful to him. The more she pondered over this, the greater her aversion to him became. Clarence, unaware of what had happened, and never dreaming Norah guessed he wished to marry her for her money, resolved to try his luck again.

He soon had an opportunity, as Norah was often to be found alone.

He approached the subject delicately, leading up to it in a subtle way, and eventually asking her to be his wife. Her refusal this time was still more emphatic, and there was such contempt in her tones that he lost his temper.

"Why do you refuse me?" he asked angrily. "Am I not good enough for you? Perhaps you wish to marry a title; they are not to be picked up every day, and you are getting on in life."

It was a rude speech, which she resented.

"I have no desire to marry a title," she said, "but my husband must be an honest man."

Clarence started, and changed colour. Was there any covert meaning in her words?

Norah noticed his action, and scored it up against him.

"Do you mean to insinuate I am not an honest man?" he asked angrily.

"If the cap fits, you can wear it," she replied.

"It might apply to Colin, but not to me, and I think you rather favoured the scapegrace," he said.

"I still favour him. I love him, and I do not believe he did anything wrong, it was against his nature," she answered.

"It is no use arguing that point," he said. "He was guilty, and he did the best thing possible under the circumstances."

"I *know* he did not forge the cheque," she said quietly.

"Do you? Then perhaps you can give me the name of the culprit," he said with a sneer.

"Would you like to hear it?"

"Oh yes, it would enlighten me considerably."

She wavered in her purpose. If he had committed the forgery he took it very coolly; no doubt he felt perfectly safe from discovery. Her hesitation was momentary, she decided to go on.

"I think the name of the man who forged the cheque, or caused it to be forged, is Clarence Newby," she said calmly, looking him full in the face.

The accusation was so unexpected, the blow so direct, that he staggered away from her. He recovered himself quickly, and stepping up to her said, with a nasty look on his face—

"You are joking; but let me tell you it is not the sort of joke I like or will put up with."

She laughed, she was not at all afraid of him, and his conduct convinced her there was some truth in the accusation.

"I am not joking," she said, "it is not a matter to joke about. Has your recent conduct towards Sir Owen been upright and honourable?"

So she knew about that; he must be careful.

"I have done nothing I am ashamed of," he answered lamely.

"Some men are hard to shame."

"I have been unfortunate, that is all."

"And used Sir Owen's money to help you out of your difficulties. Having exhausted that source, you wish to try what you can do in my direction. Is not that the reason I have been honoured with your proposal?" she asked.

"You are appearing in your true colours now," he said, with a sneer. "I am fortunate in being refused, I have no desire to marry a vixen."

"The vixen may prove more than a match for you," she replied. "I shall not rest until I have proved Colin's innocence."

"Then I am afraid the remainder of your life will be restless, rather more active than you desire. You may possibly have the makings of a female detective in you, but I doubt it."

"I shall prove more than equal to you."

"Colin is fortunate in having such a faithful guardian of his name. So you confess you love him? Well, I wish you joy of your choice, but you cannot marry a memory, and I don't suppose you will ever see him again," he said.

"You are mistaken, I shall see him again, and when he returns I do not think you will dare to meet him."

Clarence laughed harshly as he replied—

"I am not likely to have the chance, he is probably dead by this time."

His words were spoken with such a callous feeling she resented them, and replied bitterly—

"If he is dead, his death will lie at your door, for you were the cause of all his trouble."

"I strongly advise you not to allow your suspicions to overrun your discretion. I am not a man to be trifled with, and if you so much as hint what you have suggested to me, I shall not hesitate to take steps to clear my character," he said.

"A threat of libel," she answered, laughing. "I do not think you would stand a severe cross-examination. I am quite convinced there is something in my suspicion, and I shall, in the first place, mention it to Sir Owen."

Clarence Newly changed colour. Mention it to his father! The mere hint of such a thing, in Sir Owen's present state of mind against him, might prove disastrous.

"You dare not do it," he said.

"Why not? He ought to know what I think."

"Why do you bring such a base accusation against me? You have no grounds for it."

"You were always anxious to get rid of Colin, have him sent away from Woodsdown," she said.

"And so you think I got him into trouble to accomplish that end?"

"Yes, that is what it amounts to."

"Then let me tell you your conduct is beneath contempt. You have lived at Woodsdown all your life, and now you repay Sir Owen for his kindness by trying to make terrible mischief between us. Tell my father what you think, I know what he will do?" said Clarence.

"What will he do?"

"Turn you out of the house, and it will serve you right."

She smiled as she said—

"It will not be me he will turn out when he learns the truth."

"Then you are determined to tell him?"

"I am, and ask him to make strict inquiries into the matter."

Clarence Newly could hardly control himself. He saw she meant what she said, and for him it would probably mean ruin. He could have struck her down in his anger, she faced him so bravely.

"Do your worst," he said. "Sir Owen will not believe you, and your disgrace is certain, and will be deserved."

Before she could reply, he turned abruptly and left her.

He walked to the stables, ordered the dog-cart, and drove to the station.

Sir Owen was away in Paris; he frequently went there on business, with which he combined a good deal of pleasure that Lady Newly would hardly have approved of.

Norah saw nothing more of Clarence during the week, and wondered what he was doing. She had only intended frightening him. She would not tell Sir Owen her suspicions until she had some confirmation. It was hardly likely he would believe her story, probably he would be

angry, and she liked him, despite his occasionally harsh manner and ill temper. He had been kind to her, and she had no wish to cause him pain, but Colin's name must be cleared at all cost, and she felt she was on the right track at last.

Clarence Newly arrived in London, and the following morning went to the office as usual. Shortly after noon he went out, and did not return; he never came back again.

When Sir Owen arrived from Paris he found a sum of seven thousand pounds had been drawn out of the bank. He examined the cheque, saw it was a very clever forgery, and made no comment, but the blow struck home, and when he went down to Woodsdoun he was a changed man. He knew Clarence had gone, he also knew that he had involved him in liabilities he would have some difficulty in meeting, but he registered a vow that they should be met, and that he would work hard and make a recovery. He had an iron will and great self-confidence. He knew how to make money, had done it before, and would do it again.

The truth came out, and the news spread about Clarence Newly's base conduct; but the forgery he kept to himself for some time. Some months after Clarence went away, Sir Owen sat talking with his wife and Norah.

"You are all we have left to us, my girl," he said sadly. "You have always had faith in Colin, Norah, and you were right. I know who forged that cheque now, it was not Colin."

"God bless you for those words, Owen!" said his wife, going over to him and kissing him. "I am the happiest woman alive."

Norah looked at him in amazement. He knew who committed the forgery! Was her suspicion correct? She waited breathlessly for him to speak.

"It was not our son who forged his father's name, Ella," he said, "it was my son—Clarence."

For some minutes he was too much overcome to speak, then mastering his feelings, he explained how Clarence had again forged his name before he left the office for good, and how this had convinced him he had also committed the forgery of which Colin had been unjustly accused.

CHAPTER XVIII

OFF TO SYDNEY

COLIN, unaware of the change that had taken place in England, was happy and contented at Dimboola. At last after years of wandering and hardships, he had found a place which he regarded as a real home. Kenneth Harvey placed implicit confidence in him, and Madge was never happier than when in his company.

The result of the match between Black Star and Maneroo was a disappointment to the hands at Dimboola but they accepted the defeat with a good grace, hoping, however, for a chance to get their money back in the future. Captain Donnell wished to accompany Kenneth Harvey to Sydney, but before he left it was necessary to communicate with the camp in the ranges. How was he to accomplish this without rousing suspicions at the station? It was a difficult matter, but it must be overcome.

"How far is it to Moraine?" he asked one evening.

"About thirty miles, almost in a direct line from here," said Kenneth.

"I think I'll have a ride over just to kill time," he replied. "I can find my way alone, I suppose?"

"You will have no difficulty about that," answered Kenneth, "but if you wish it Colin can go with you; we can spare him."

"There is no necessity for that," said Donnell. "I am a good hand at finding my way in a strange country."

"As you wish; when do you propose to go?"

"To-morrow. I may remain away for a night, but you may expect me back in time to accompany you to Sydney."

"If you like to remain at Moraine I can pick you up there," said Kenneth. "It will save you the return journey."

"Is it the nearest way to Crowhurst to go through Moraine?"

"No there is a shorter cut we can take on horseback, but that does not matter if you would rather wait for me at the township."

"I will come back, then we can start from here and take the shorter route."

"Very well," said Kenneth. "I shall be quite ready to leave on Monday."

Next morning Captain Donnell rode Black Star out of the yard and went in the direction pointed out, as being the most direct to Moraine. He rode several miles before venturing to change his course, as he had no desire to be caught making for the ranges.

Turning his horse's head in the opposite direction to that in which he had been travelling, he rode at a fast pace towards the mountains. It was afternoon when he reached the pass, and both Donnell and his horse were tired out, as the sun had been glaring fiercely all day.

The men were anxiously awaiting his arrival, and it was with a feeling of relief they saw him coming up the path.

"Let me rest, and see to my horse, and then I'll talk to you," he said; and seeing he was tired out they let him sleep for three or four hours. After a hearty meal, Captain Donnell related all that had taken place at Dimboola. His account of the match was listened to with much interest.

"So it's a fact that Sergeant Schaaf and his troopers are coming to hunt us down, and that their head-quarters are to be at Dimboola?" said Jake Hayes.

"Yes, and he may be expected there early next week. You must keep a sharp look-out, and if you lie close I don't think you'll be in any danger."

He wished to broach the subject of his contemplated visit to Sydney, wanting to put it in such a way that they would not regard it as an act of desertion on his part.

"I have a plan," he went on, "that will rid you of your most dangerous opponent during Schaaf's operations. Kenneth Harvey knows the lay of the land, and the tracks through the ranges, better than any one in the district. Schaaf is no doubt reckoning upon his assistance, but I can tell you that the owner of Dimboola is no man-hunter. I have been anxious to go to Sydney for some time, and now have an opportunity to travel there in excellent company. I have persuaded Kenneth Harvey to go with me, that will make him safe, and as we start on Monday he will be away during Schaaf's visit. What do you think of the plan? Of course I run considerable risk, but I'm used to it, and being in Harvey's company will at any rate lessen the suspicion any one may entertain as to my identity. He will probably bring a large sum of money back with him, which I may find a favourable opportunity of securing during our journey. He has not the slightest suspicion as to who I am, nor has any one on the station. You will get on very well without me; in fact my presence would only add to your danger, for after all it is me Schaaf wants in order to get the reward."

They listened to him quietly, and although they had no desire to lose his valuable services, in case it came to a fight, they saw the force of his reasoning. Undoubtedly it would be a great advantage if Kenneth Harvey was away from Dimboola during Schaaf's presence in the country. His absence would put a damper on the Sergeant's plans, and the probabilities were that without a guide to the ranges he would soon give up the search. Not one of them doubted Captain Donnell's intentions, although had they known it was in his mind to cut adrift from them they would have acted differently.

"You'll return from Sydney with him?" said Jake.

"Of course I shall; there's not much chance of doing any business there," answered Donnell.

Jake Hayes thought it would be a good plan to make a raid on

Dimboola during Kenneth Harvey's absence, and before the police arrived, but he kept this to himself, doubting whether Donnell would approve of it.

The men agreed to let Captain Donnell go ; probably they thought in any case he would do as he pleased.

Before he left he advised them what to do in case their hiding-place was found, and they were attacked. He pointed out the best means to adopt to defend the place, and how to beat a retreat through the passage in the mountains, if it became necessary. They must also keep a constant watch over the plain in the direction of Dimboola, never leaving the entrance to the pass unguarded, or neglecting any precautions. "If you carry out my instructions you need have no fear of being caught," he said.

He parted from them on friendly terms and again rode in the direction of Moraine, then branched off and headed for Dimboola, where he arrived at night.

Kenneth Harvey decided to place Colin in charge during his absence, although he demurred, saying that Cridge was entitled to take command.

"I have spoken to Ben," said Mr. Harvey, "and he is only too glad to be relieved of the responsibility. I warn you there may be a raid made on the station, if the Eureka gang learn of my absence. You will have Schaaf and his troopers handy, so there will be nothing to fear. What I particularly wish you all to do is to keep an eye on Madge ; you know how she rides about the country alone, and there may be danger now that this fellow Donnell is with them. I have no doubt he'd consider kidnapping Madge fair game, and likely to lead to the payment of a stiff ransom for her recovery, what do you think, Mr. Connor?"

"My opinion of Captain Donnell is not so bad as that of the majority. I do not think he would be guilty of an attempt to seize a young girl like Madge," said Donnell.

"Not even to raise a big sum in the way of ransom?"

"No."

"You are mistaken," said Mr. Harvey sharply. "Such a man would be guilty of any outrage."

Colin promised to guard Madge carefully, and to keep her in sight if possible.

"You had better not warn her," he said, "it may only alarm her without any cause."

"I don't suppose there is much danger, but one never can tell," said Kenneth.

Madge felt perfectly safe with Colin in the house, and bid her father good-bye cheerfully, telling him to be sure and bring her something nice from Sydney.

Kenneth took her in his arms and kissed her fondly, telling her to be very good and obey Colin's instructions.

"And Julia's?" said Madge, with a laugh.

"Yes, Julia's of course."

"Then I shall have my time fully occupied," was her reply, and her father joined in her merriment.

Captain Donnell rode Black Star and Kenneth Harvey was mounted

on a powerful half-bred horse that had carried him many hundreds of miles. It was their intention to ride direct to Crowhurst, and then take the train to Sydney, the horses going with them.

Donnell wondered if there was any chance of coming across Schaaf, or if they were likely to go near Abergyle; that must be avoided if possible, the risk would be too great.

He dexterously approached the subject, and was relieved when his companion answered that they left Abergyle several miles away on their right.

A two hundred and fifty miles' ride was no uncommon stretch in those days, and Captain Donnell thought nothing of it, nor did Kenneth Harvey, who had been over the ground several times.

They put up for the nights at different stations, which they took in their way, and were hospitably entertained.

The squatters were always glad to welcome strangers, it was a change in the monotony of their lives to see fresh faces and hear new voices.

Kenneth Harvey, being well known and popular in the West, was doubly welcome, and Captain Donnell commenced to realize that the man he travelled with was of some importance in the country. His advice was always listened to with attention, his views on political and other subjects acknowledged to be sound. Moreover, he gave hints that were valuable regarding speculative investments, and the squatters were always anxious to add to their incomes by buying mining shares, or claims, and property.

Thus their journey was made pleasant, and the time passed quickly until they arrived at Crowhurst, where they caught the first train to Sydney.

CHAPTER XIX

THE BLACK FELLOWS' TRICK.

SERGEANT SCHAAF, accompanied by ten troopers, arrived at Dimboola a few days after the departure of Kenneth Harvey and Captain Donnell for Sydney. He was disappointed to find Mr. Harvey absent, as he had reckoned upon his accompanying them to the ranges, and giving them the benefit of his knowledge. However, he had to make the best of it, and did not give up hopes of finding the gang in their hiding-place.

The Eureka mountains were visible in the distance from Dimboola, and once there he meant to search the ranges thoroughly. Schaaf did not lack courage, but he was not a good leader, and on more than one occasion his men grumbled at being led into unnecessary danger. Hunting outlaws was all very well in its way, but it was a risky game, and there was no reward for them at the end of it, that would fall to Schaaf's share. The deeds of Captain Donnell inspired them with a wholesome dread of his prowess, and they were aware he possessed military training, which would prove useful in case they had to attack a stronghold.

Colin would have liked to accompany them, but did not think it advisable in the absence of Kenneth Harvey. In addition to his ten troopers, Schaaf also had a couple of black trackers, clever fellows, who were seldom at fault in finding and following a trail.

The police made use of these blacks whenever possible, and although the mounted men despised them as creatures of a lower order, they recognised the value of their services. It was marvellous what these men could accomplish, and where the whites would have been utterly at a loss, the black trackers worked the country easily.

They set out for the ranges early the morning after their arrival, Schaaf eager to get the work done, for there had been rumours of disturbances at the Golden Lead mines, and he might be called away to keep order there. He had left word at Abergyle and Moraine where he was to be found, and knew he would be sent for if the slightest necessity arose. Acting on Donnell's advice, a sharp look-out was kept by the gang, and the coming of Schaaf and his men was reported as soon as they came in sight.

It would have been an easy matter to shoot them down as they entered the pass, but the men were eager to avoid an encounter if possible. Their camp was in a strong situation, difficult to locate, so it was determined to keep quiet and await events.

Sergeant Schaaf and his men entered the gorge without the least fear of an ambuscade. Schaaf knew the ways of the bushrangers, and was certain they would not attack him if it could be avoided.

The black trackers went ahead, and when they reached the second range, at the end of the pass, left their horses with the main body and climbed up the steep mountain side with the agility of wild animals. They obtained foothold where no white man could have trod, and in an incredibly short time reached the summit, from where they had a good view of the country for many miles. The Australian blacks have remarkable eyesight, and can see long distances, discerning moving objects the mounted police are unable to distinguish.

Sergeant Schaaf and his men dismounted to await their return. If the blacks discerned anything he meant to ride along at the foot of the mountain until he found an opening which led to the farther side. He must pierce to the heart of the ranges, for he knew it was in the place most difficult of access the gang were likely to be found. He little thought the man he was in search of was in Sydney with Kenneth Harvey. It was a bold stroke on Donnell's part that he would never have dreamt of.

The blacks scanned the country far and near, seeing nothing to excite suspicion. They looked for tracks, examining the ground closely, but saw none. After a time they came down the mountain again, and reported that the country was exceedingly difficult, and that the horses would be almost unable to traverse it.

"They've got to get through somehow," said Schaaf. "The men in the gang have horses, we may be sure of that, and if they can get them there we ought to be able to do so."

They followed the mountain, circling round, but finding no pass until near nightfall, when they came across a narrow gully that led through the range. Here they camped for the night to be ready to continue progress at daylight. The men were tired with their day's ride, and slept soundly, the guard being changed at intervals, for it was not safe to leave the place unwatched.

If Schaaf had his black trackers, so had the bushrangers. They had in the camp three blacks, who had been with them for some months. These fellows had been well treated; it was a wise policy to adopt, and found the life with the gang far more comfortable than in their humpys.

Many of the blacks hated the police, who in some cases ill-treated them, and Schaaf, in particular, was thoroughly detested, because he waged perpetual war against them, driving them from one place to another as the whim took him. Cunning fellows they were, knowing every point of the ranges, and able to conceal themselves quickly when danger was near.

Jake Hayes sent two of these blacks from the camp to watch the movements of the police, and they had seen the trackers spying out the country from the top of the first range; when they disappeared they crept forward and followed the Sergeant and his escort to their camping-place.

They crawled to the top of the rocks, which overhung the police camp, and gazed down at their enemies. Rage took possession of them as they singled out the hated and much-dreaded Schaaf, and they

shook their fists at him in a menacing way. When the bulk of the men were lying stretched on the ground, with their saddles for pillows, the two blacks talked together in a whisper. It was evident they were turning over something in their minds, arranging a plan that had not been contemplated by the bushrangers.

One of them pointed to some large boulders which stood loose on the mountain side, suggesting they could be easily rolled down and crash into the camp with dire effect. The other black's eyes glistened and he jabbered fast, agreeing with his companion's idea.

They squatted down and waited. There was no moon, but the stars shone brightly, and they were accustomed to piercing the darkness with their keen eyes.

In the middle of the night Schaaf awoke suddenly, springing to his feet with a bound. A terrible rushing, bumping sound was heard, then a terrific crash, followed by groans and cries of pain from some of his men. At first, being only half awake, he fancied it must be an earthquake, but as a second huge boulder came thundering down the slope he realized what had happened; there were men on the top hurling these rocks into the camp. He yelled to his men to run for their lives, setting the example, and stumbling along in the darkness, bruising his legs, and falling more than once.

The horses, thoroughly frightened, broke away and stampeded, but could not go far, as their passage was barred by the rocks on the opposite side of the gully; some of them, however, found the pass and made the best of their way down it.

A third large stone came thundering down, then a fourth, and Schaaf shouted to his men to fire in that direction. This was easier said than done, for it was a difficult matter to see; and so sudden had been the attack that several of them had scrambled away leaving their rifles behind.

Three, however, fired at the top of the mountain, and the shots were answered by a yell of pain, and the sound of a heavy body thudding down into the gully.

"That's brought one of the devils to grass," said the Sergeant. "Fire again."

Another volley rang out in the darkness, but this time there was no answering cry.

When one of the blacks were hit, and fell headlong into the gully, his companion made off as fast as he could scramble over the rough surface. He reached the camp, reporting that his mate had been shot.

"More fool he to show himself," was Jake's gruff reply.

The black fellow explained what had happened with much delight, the loss of his mate not appearing to trouble him greatly.

The men were well pleased at this misfortune which had overtaken the police thus early in their search, thinking it would dishearten them. They showed their appreciation of the black's ingenuity by giving him a stiff drink of rum, his favourite beverage, and an extra supply of rations.

When daylight came, Sergeant Schaaf inspected the ruin of his camp.

Three of his men were hurt, one had his left arm broken, another a

badly bruised ankle, and the third was severely battered about the head. The black lay at the foot of the slope dead, and Schaaf was surprised to see him instead of a white man. This put him off the scent; he thought there must be a tribe of blacks in the ranges, for he did not connect him in any way with the bushrangers.

Schaaf had a good deal of experience of the methods of attack by the blacks, and knew they were not devoid of cunning.

Already three of his men were put out of action, and they could not be left behind to the mercy of the blacks, while their companions went forward into the ranges. This created an awkward situation, and after considering various plans, Schaaf decided the only thing to be done was to take the wounded men back to Dimboola, and then return to the ranges to continue his search.

This unfortunate affair angered him, and as he passed the dead black he kicked the body with his foot. The trackers scowled at him, they had no love for the Sergeant, and the black was one of themselves. When he went on they took up the body, carried it away, and scooping out a hole, buried it.

Late in the afternoon Colin was greatly surprised to see the police return to Dimboola. Schaaf related what had taken place, and Julia attended to the injured men.

Colin, when he heard of his intention to return to the ranges, asked if he desired any of the hands to go with him, in place of the men he had to leave behind.

This was an offer Schaaf gladly availed himself of, and Colin said there would be no difficulty in arranging it, as every one would eagerly volunteer. He knew Kenneth Harvey would approve of such a course being adopted, as he was anxious to have the ranges cleared of the dangerous gang. Something, however, occurred next morning which completely upset all their plans.

CHAPTER XX

MADGE CAPTURED.

EARLY in the morning, before Schaaf had time to start for the ranges, a man on horseback entered the yard. He had come in hot haste, for his horse was distressed and could not have gone much farther.

He had ridden from Moraine, and reported that serious disturbances were taking place at the Golden Lead mines, and Schaaf and his men were required at once to quell the rioting.

This was most annoying to the Sergeant, for it upset all his plans, and he must abandon, for the present, all idea of returning to the ranges. He dare not refuse to go, as the mines were in his district, and he was responsible for keeping the peace. There was nothing for it but to order his men to saddle and ride to Moraine. The three injured men he left at Dimboola, with instruction to report themselves as soon as they were able to get about.

Colin, too, was sorry the Sergeant's plans were thwarted, as he hoped the gang would be hunted out of the ranges before the return of Kenneth Harvey.

Schaaf rode away in an ill-humour, which boded no good for the rioters at the mines; he was not accustomed to spare men when the law was on his side.

The bushrangers were not long in discovering Schaaf had broken up his camp and left the ranges, and as they saw no signs of the police during the two days following they concluded he had given up the search. This put them in good spirits, and they determined to find out whether he was still at Dimboola. For this purpose they sent out one of the blacks with instructions to make his way to the station.

Black fellows often came to Dimboola, sometimes a dozen or more at a time, occasionally a whole tribe, and frequently odd blacks, in search of food. No suspicion as to where he came from was excited when Willie entered the station yard.

The black boy, Jimmy, was idling about, and Willie asked him for some food, which he soon procured, during Julia's absence from the kitchen.

Jimmy liked a chat with one of his tribe, to which Willie belonged, and the man had no difficulty in obtaining all the information he required from the boy. Jimmy explained that Schaaf and his men had gone to the Golden Lead mines, and had given up all idea of searching the ranges for the present.

This was all Willie wished to know, and in due course he took his departure, making his way back to the ranges.

When the gang learnt the state of affairs at Dimboola, they held a consultation as to what they should do. Kenneth Harvey was absent, and this was favourable for a successful raid on the horses or cattle, whichever it was easy to take. Jake Hayes was tired of being inactive, and readily agreed to fall in with their plans. It was decided that four of them, including Jake, should ride towards Dimboola, and lie concealed in some convenient spot until nightfall, when they could easily make their way to one of the horse paddocks. They possessed accurate information as to the numerous enclosures round the homestead, and the surrounding country was well known to most of them.

One of the four men chosen, named Seth Hart, said he knew of a safe place where they could lie hidden without much fear of discovery, and after an hour or more in the saddle he conducted them to an old water-hole, near which was a clump of trees and a considerable quantity of dense brushwood. Here they decided to stay for the afternoon, as there was very little likelihood of being disturbed.

Towards four o'clock Jake, looking across the country, saw a girl on horseback, and a big dog accompanying her, coming in their direction. He called Seth Hart and pointed her out to him, asking who she was.

"It's Harvey's girl, there's no one else about here; it must be her."

"She's coming this way," said Jake; "suppose she discovers us?"

"She's not likely to do that, but the dog might," replied Seth.

"What shall we do?"

Seth considered for a few moments, then said—

"Suppose we 'nab' her? It could be easily done, and she'd take no harm in our camp for a few weeks. Kenneth Harvey would give a stiff sum to get her back safe and sound; he'd go wild with rage at her disappearance, and when Captain Donnell returns he could open up negotiations with him for her ransom."

"It's not a bad idea," said Jake, "but would it be safe? He'd scour the country to try and find her, and our hiding-place might be discovered; is it worth the risk?"

"Let's us ask the others," said Seth.

They consulted their companions, who agreed with Seth that it would be a good stroke of business to capture the girl, and keep her until Captain Donnell returned.

Meanwhile Madge, all unconscious of danger, was enjoying her gallop across the plain. Since her father's absence she had been kept within bounds, but on this particular afternoon she managed to evade the vigilance of Colin and Julia, had saddled her horse, and quickly slipped away without being noticed.

She enjoyed her ride the more because she had managed to outwit them, and meant to laugh at their lack of vigilance on her return.

That there was any danger in her conduct she never imagined; she was accustomed to riding alone when her father was at home, what difference could it make during his absence?

She had ridden to the clump of trees and the old water-hole before;

it was farther than she usually went, but on this occasion she determined to make the best use of her freedom.

"I'll turn back as soon as I reach it," she thought, "and I shall be home in good time. What a jolly gallop, isn't it, Koola?" she said to the dog.

They were nearing the place, when Koola suddenly stopped and commenced to growl ominously.

Madge reined in her horse quickly and looked around, but saw nothing to excite the dog's suspicion.

"What is it, Koola?" she asked.

The dog looked towards the trees and bushes, and again growled savagely.

"Something in there?" said Madge laughing. "Go and fetch 'em, good dog."

The hair on Koola's back bristled and he barked angrily.

Madge thought some animal must be concealed, and again urged him on to the attack.

At last Koola sprang forward with a bound, rushing up towards the bushes. Before he reached them there was a shot, and poor Koola rolled over and lay kicking on the ground.

Madge gave a scream, called to the dog, and quickly turned her horse round. She heard a crashing sound behind her, then the thud of horses' hoofs, and before she could force her horse into a gallop two men raced up, one on either side of her, and seized the reins.

Even now Madge hardly realized what had befallen her. She thought it was a joke they were playing, to frighten her, she had not been molested before.

She looked from Jake to Seth and saw they were armed, and strangers to her.

"What do you want?" she asked. "Why did you shoot my dog?"

The thought of Koola roused her anger, and she said—

"You are cowards, he would not have hurt you. Let go my reins. I want to see my dog."

"You can see him if you wish, but it's all up with him," said Seth. "I'm sorry we had to shoot him, but he was dangerous."

"Who are you?" asked Madge.

"Never mind who we are," said Seth. "If you keep quiet, and do as you are told, you'll come to no harm. We want you to pay us a visit for a short time."

"Let me go at once," said Madge indignantly. "My father will make you pay for this."

"It's your father will have to pay us if he wants to get you back, and a stiff figure too," said Jake.

"You must let me go home at once," said Madge. "They will wonder where I am."

"They'll have to keep on wondering," said Seth.

He pulled the horse round and led her towards the bushes; Madge then saw there were two more men, also armed, and she knew she had fallen into the hands of the Eureka gang.

The thought caused her to turn pale, but she reflected that they

would not harm her, and that a search party would speedily be sent out from Dimboola when she was missed. She regretted she had disobeyed Colin and ridden out alone.

As she was passing Koola she looked at the faithful animal with tears in her eyes; he had warned her there was danger ahead, and if she had heeded it there might have been a chance of escape; instead of that, she had urged him on to his death.

"You wicked men to shoot my dog!" she said angrily, and both Jake and Seth felt a bit ashamed.

They refused to let her dismount, and Seth told one of the men to drag the dog into the bushes, and this was done amidst tears and reproaches from Madge.

"He's dead, isn't he?" said Jake.

"Oh, yes, he's dead all right," replied the man as he hid Koola in the dense undergrowth.

Madge cried bitterly, she was more concerned at the loss of Koola than about her own fate.

The men set off, Seth still leading her horse by the rein.

"Where are you taking me to?" asked Madge.

"To our country house," said Jake, grinning. "I think you'll like the scenery. I don't expect you have been there before, although it is near Dimboola."

"You belong to the Eureka gang," said Madge.

"That's the name you give us, is it?" said Seth. "Well, I guess it will do as well as another."

"Schaaf and his men will soon hunt you down," said Madge, "and you'll be sorry you did not leave me alone."

"We are not afraid of a dozen men like Schaaf, he's a fool," replied Seth.

"My father will have you punished. You had better let me go; if you do I will say nothing about this."

"We have gone too far now," said Jake. "Take my advice and make the best of it. You'll not have to stay long with us; when your father returns from Sydney, he'll soon pay down the cash for you."

"How do you know my father is in Sydney?" asked Madge, surprised.

"There's not much goes on round here we don't know," said Jake, laughing.

CHAPTER XXI

KOOLA FOUND

ALTHOUGH Madge was aware she was in the power of a desperate gang she was not afraid. They were not likely to harm her, it would not pay them. She was more troubled about Colin and Julia than about her own situation. She knew how anxious they would be, wondering what had befallen her. If they found Koola no doubt they would guess what had happened.

The men rode at a rapid pace to the ranges, and Madge determined to take note of the way they went to their camp, the knowledge she obtained might come in useful in the future.

When they entered the ranges, however, Seth insisted upon Madge being blindfolded, although Jake protested it was unnecessary, as such a young girl would not be likely to take sufficient notice of the way they travelled to use it against them.

"You're mistaken," said Seth. "She's as sharp as a needle, you've only got to look at her to see that, and I don't intend to run any risks."

Madge was blindfolded accordingly, Seth saying if she tried to remove the bandage her hands would be tied behind her. Under threat of this penalty Madge determined to submit to the bandaging.

The journey seemed wearisome now there was nothing to attract her attention; the horses stumbled painfully along, and the men from time to time muttered curses at their clumsiness.

At last they came to a halt. Madge heard the sound of other voices, and exclamations of surprise at her presence.

The bandage was removed, and she was lifted from the saddle. At first she was unable to see distinctly, but in a few minutes her sight became clearer and she looked round wonderingly. She was in a large cave, and round her were grouped many rough men, who regarded her with curious glances.

"You are welcome to our camp," said Seth. "Are you hungry after your long ride?"

"No, but I am thirsty," said Madge.

One of the men brought her some water, clear as crystal, in a small can, and she drank eagerly.

"Where am I?" she asked.

"In the heart of the Eureka ranges, where it will be difficult for any one to find you," said Seth.

"And is this your home?"

"Yes, we live here; how do you like it?"

Madge shuddered as she replied—

"I don't like it at all, I hate caves."

"Not so comfortable as Dimboola, I expect," said Seth. "If your father has any sense he will come to our terms, and you will speedily find your way home. While you are here you must make the best of it, for we cannot allow you to go out alone, you might get lost; it's a curious country to wander about in without you know it well."

Madge was very tired, and it was not long before she commenced to nod. Seeing she was sleepy, Seth Hart had a comfortable bed made for her at the far side of the cave, and here she lay down thoroughly exhausted. Some of the men thought it a foolhardy thing to capture the girl, they would much have preferred their mates returning with horses and cattle.

"We're sure to get into trouble over her," growled one. "Why not send her back in the morning?"

"After the trouble we have had to get her here?" laughed Seth. "Not much, Harry; you're a fool to suggest such a thing. Kenneth Harvey will come down handsome in the way of ransom, he'd give half his fortune to get her back."

"He'll try and take her without payment," said Harry.

"Not if we threaten to do for her if he makes any move in that direction," answered Seth.

"You'd not hurt the girl?" said Harry.

"No, but we could easily make him believe she was in danger," replied Seth.

As the affair was talked over there seemed some likelihood of a serious quarrel arising, until Jake Hayes said as the girl was there they must make the best of it. He did not think there was any danger, but if it so happened that there was they must be prepared to meet it.

Madge's disappearance from Dimboola caused a consternation. At first Colin laughed, and said—

"She has outwitted us this time, Julia, and gone for a ride on her own account; she'll be back soon, and she has Koola with her."

Julia, however, was very uneasy. She blamed herself for losing sight of Madge during Colin's absence, and eagerly awaited her return.

Not until darkness set in did they become seriously alarmed, but when eight o'clock came and there were no signs of Madge, trouble and anxiety was depicted on every face.

Ben Cridge rode in the direction of the creek. He cooe'd at intervals, but there was no answering sound, and he returned disheartened. Bill Blower had ridden in the opposite direction, and he too returned unsuccessful.

Julia was overcome with fear for Madge's safety, and for once completely lost her head, walking about moaning and crying bitterly.

Soon after ten o'clock Colin, accompanied by Ben and Bill, rode out to scour the country. They knew very little could be done in the darkness, but still they would not remain at home until daylight.

All night long they rode about the country hardly knowing in which direction they went, shouting aloud until they were hoarse.

Colin tried to compose himself and think what had happened to her. Had she met with an accident, been thrown from her horse? He doubted this, for she was such a good rider. She could not have lost her way, unless darkness set in when she was a long distance from the house. If this had happened she might be waiting in some safe place until it was light, and with Koola at her side there was not much to be feared. He hoped this was so, and that morning would bring hope.

Daylight burst upon them rapidly, and they scanned the country for miles round with the aid of a powerful glass, but not a sign of Madge was to be seen. They found they had ridden in the darkness towards the old water-hole, where the bushrangers had been concealed, and where Koola had been dragged into the scrub.

The ground here was hard and dusty, and Ben was the first to notice it had been trampled by horses' hoofs, Koola's big footmarks were also seen here and there. Ben dismounted, and pointed them out to Colin, who asked what he surmised from them.

"There's been three or four horses here," said Ben. "One must have been Madge's, because Koola's footmarks are here. It's my opinion the Eureka gang have caught her."

Colin looked aghast as he exclaimed—

"Good God, Ben, you don't think she's in the power of those ruffians?"

"I don't see what else we can make of it, but you needn't be alarmed for her safety, they'll not hurt her, they know a game worth two of that. They've carried her off and mean to make her father smart before he recovers her. It's been done before, it's not a new dodge by any means. I once knew a squatter who had to pay a big sum to some men who kidnapped his wife and baby. He got them back all right, they had been treated well, but it cost him several thousands, I think, before he'd done with the men who carried them off."

"Do you think they'd venture so far out of the ranges?" said Colin. "It may have been the blacks."

"Blacks have no horses, at least not many about here. Depend upon it I'm right, it's the Eureka lot have her," said Ben.

As he ceased speaking a faint sound was heard in the direction of the water-hole.

"What's that?" said Bill.

"I'll go and see," replied Ben, leaving his horse and running towards the scrub.

Brushing the obstructions on one side he pushed his way through, and found Koola lying at full length, moaning piteously.

Ben stooped down beside him, patted his head, and said—

"Poor old fellow, what's the matter?"

Then he saw blood had been flowing from a bullet wound in his chest, and that loss of it had made the dog weak and unable to crawl.

He went out into the open again, calling to Colin and Bill.

"Koola's here, he's been shot," he said as they came up. "There's no doubt about her being in the hands of the Eureka gang now. I expect the dog went for them and they shot him; probably they were concealed here."

Colin was much upset at finding Koola in this state. They obtained some dirty water from the almost empty hole, which the dog drank eagerly, then Ben washed his wound and tried to extract the bullet, which he succeeded in doing after some difficulty. When the bush-ranger dragged the dog into the scrub he was to all appearances dead, and lay still for some hours. Gradually, however, he came round and struggled back to life.

"What must we do?" asked Colin.

"We can't search the ranges, that's certain. In the first place there's no chance of finding their hiding-place, and if we did they'd shoot us down before we attacked them. We must wait until Mr. Harvey returns, and then he'll set Schaaf and his men on their track."

"He'll be in a towering passion when he hears about it," said Bill.

"It will kill him if anything happens to Madge," said Colin.

"She'll be safe enough, but he'll have to buy her freedom," said Ben.

"He will not care how much it costs him if he gets her back," said Colin.

"I'm not so sure of that. He may try and hunt them down, that's more to his liking," replied Ben.

"But that might be dangerous to Madge."

"I hardly think so. They are a desperate lot, but I never heard of them injuring children," said Ben. "When will he be home?"

"I don't know, perhaps we had better send for him," said Colin.

"As likely as not we should miss him on the way," replied Ben.

"Koola is not able to walk, we'll send the buggy for him," said Colin.

They rode back to the homestead, and when Julia Hope heard that Madge had fallen into the hands of the Eureka gang she fainted, for the first time in her life.

CHAPTER XVII

"CAPTAIN" DONNELL'S OFFER

KENNETH HARVEY and Captain Donnell returned from Sydney sooner than was expected. The owner of Biraboola never cared to remain long away from the station, he was always glad to be at home again.

Captain Donnell had felt perfectly safe in the city, and no one had any idea he was the notorious Victorian bushranger, least of all Kenneth Harvey, who liked him and enjoyed his society.

No shout of welcome greeted them as they appeared in sight of the homestead, and Kenneth thought this ominous stillness strange. Why was Madge not on the look-out? Where were all the hands, and Julia? Even Koola gave no sign of warning. The silence disturbed him, made him uneasy, restless, and he said to his companion—

"I don't see any one about. I hope nothing has gone wrong in our absence."

Captain Donnell looked uneasy and hastily replied, that it was hardly possible, as they had not been away long.

"Schaaf and his men are probably in the ranges," said Kenneth. "The gang would not venture out to attack them, I think."

"That is not at all likely," said Donnell. "They know when they are safe."

They rode into the yard, and still no one appeared.

Kenneth shouted, and presently Jimmy, the black boy, came slowly out of the kitchen. He stared in amazement when he saw them, then bolted inside again.

"Something is amiss, I am sure," said Kenneth, as he hastily dismounted and strode towards the house.

Before he reached it, Julia appeared in the doorway and her face betokened trouble.

Kenneth stared at her woebegone countenance, then asked—

"What is the matter with you? are you ill? Where's Colin and Madge?"

Julia commenced to wring her hands, she dare not look him in the face. What would he say, or do, when he heard Madge was missing?

"I wish I were dead," groaned Julia.

Kenneth was fast losing his temper.

"Don't be a fool," he said angrily. "What is the cause of this? Tell me at once."

Julia looked round for a way of escape, and caught sight of Colin coming across one of the paddocks.

"There's Colin, ask him; I can't tell, I daren't," gasped Julia, and backed into the kitchen.

Kenneth was now thoroughly roused, this strange behaviour was unaccountable. Leaving her in disgust, he went to meet Colin, who was as much surprised as Jimmy and Julia to see him.

"Have you all gone mad?" asked Kenneth sharply. "This is a nice welcome home, I must say."

Colin seemed to have lost his power of speech, and stood silent, his head hanging down, his eyes on the ground.

This conduct irritated Kenneth still more. He credited Colin with having plenty of common sense, yet his behaviour was quite as strange as Julia's.

"Confound it, man, can't you speak? If there's anything wrong, out with it. Where's Madge?"

This was the question Colin dreaded above all others, and which Julia had deftly avoided. Kenneth Harvey felt a cold shiver pass through him as Colin still remained silent. He strode up to him, gripped him by the arm, and asked again—

"Where's Madge?"

Colin knew he must answer, but wished to make the blow light.

"She's out; we did not expect you back so soon," he said lamely.

"Out, where?" exclaimed Kenneth.

"Mr. Harvey, you must control yourself," said Colin. "I have bad news for you, but there's no danger, I am certain of it."

"Where's Madge?" said Kenneth in a threatening tone.

Captain Donnell, seeing there was something wrong, and that Kenneth Harvey was in an angry mood, came up behind him. It was as well he did, for the squatter had a heavy whip in his hand, which he twirled in an aggressive manner.

"She missing," said Colin. "Let me explain. I'm——"

Kenneth Harvey's face turned white, his eyes blazed with passion, he gripped the whip firmly, raised it, and was about to bring it down with full force on Colin's head, when Captain Donnell seized his uplifted arm, and said in a cool voice—

"Steady, man, steady; you'd had been sorry for that a minute later."

The angry man turned on the Captain and said fiercely—

"Damn you, why did you interfere? My girl's gone—Madge—and he stands there and tells me to my very face he has betrayed my trust in him. Get out of this, leave the place at once; I never wish to see you again," he said fiercely to Colin.

Although he made every allowance for the angry father, Colin could not permit such words to be addressed to him. He thanked Captain Donnell for interfering; then, without a word to Kenneth Harvey, turned and walked away.

"You'll not let him go?" said Donnell.

"He'll not go far," said Kenneth.

"He will; he's a man, and he's not likely to put up with the language you used to him. Had it been any other man he'd have knocked him down, and serve him right too," said Donnell.

"Madge has gone!" said Kenneth, almost beside himself.

"How do you know it's his fault?"

"She was left in his care," said Kenneth.

"And don't you think he's hunted high and low for her, day and night; he's fagged out, any one can see that. Call him back and apologize."

"Apologize?" thundered Kenneth.

"I said so."

"Never!"

"Then he'll not stop."

"Let him go."

"And lose all chance of finding your girl."

"What do you mean?"

"He may know where she is."

"He cannot, or he would have brought her home at any cost."

"You do him that much credit?" said Donnell.

"Yes, he's no coward."

"That's true. If you'd struck him, he would not have hit you back. He's a brave, honest fellow, and you're treating him badly," said Donnell.

Kenneth Harvey hesitated, he began to see he was in the wrong, and being a straight goer, he did the straight thing, he shouted to Colin to come back.

Colin heard him, hesitated a moment, then smiling to himself turned about and walked back.

The two men faced each other. Kenneth held out his hand as he said—

"Will you take it and forgive me? I was wrong, but the thought of Madge drove me mad. I am calmer now; I apologize."

Colin took his hand, gripping it hard, as he said—

"I knew you'd call me back. There is nothing to forgive, I know you did not mean it."

"But I did at the time," said Kenneth grimly and honestly.

"That time is past," said Colin. "We will forget it."

"But Madge, tell me about her. Where is she? how did she come to be lost?" said Kenneth, growing excited again.

"Come inside and I will tell you everything," said Colin, and they went into the house, Captain Donnell remaining outside.

"Come in," Kenneth shouted to him. "You may as well hear the story."

Donnell followed them, and Colin told them how Madge had ridden out alone, escaping their vigilance for the first time, and not returning. He pictured the consternation her absence caused and how they had scoured the country. He explained how they discovered Koola at the water-hole, and how they arrived at the conclusion she had been kidnapped by the Eureka gang to be held for a ransom.

When Kenneth Harvey heard she was in the hands of the gang he raved, and swore he would not rest until they were exterminated.

"That scoundrel, Captain Donnell, has done this," he said. "Hanging is too good for such a man. I hope Schaaf will get him. I'll help him all I can. Where is Schaaf?"

Colin explained how three of the police had been injured in the ranges, and that Schaaf had to return to Dimboola with them.

"While he was here," said Colin, "a messenger rode from Golden Lead, to say there was rioting there, and he must go at once. There was no getting out of it, and so he went, leaving the three men here; they joined him a few days ago. Matters are serious there, I have heard."

"They'll soon quiet down; money is too plentiful," said Kenneth, "and there are too many grog shanties about. We must get Madge back at any cost, we can reckon with Donnell and his gang afterwards."

"How do you know Donnell had a hand in it?" asked the Captain.

"Don't you think he had?" said Kenneth.

"No, he'd be above such a despicable trick, he's always fought fair, not with women and children. I don't believe he had any hand in it."

"But he's the leader, the organiser, the head of the whole lot," said Kenneth.

"You forget he is a fugitive in the Eureka camp. He can't have been there long, and he is only one against many."

"I cannot understand how you place any reliance in this man," said Kenneth. "He's an outlaw, a menace to society, capable of any crime."

"You are mistaken; I know the man well, he's not all bad, I assure you."

"It would be a difficult matter to find the good in him."

"Supposing I can prove to you he is not the creature you think him, that he has the feelings of a gentleman, and that he is capable of doing a generous action at the risk of his own life?" said Donnell.

"If such a miracle happened I would believe your story, and endorse your faith in him," said Kenneth, smiling incredulously.

"Supposing he brought Madge back to Dimboola without any reward, and at great risk to himself?" said Donnell.

Kenneth stared at him in amazement.

"It is incredible," he said.

"Leave the matter in my hands," said Donnell. "I know the man, and if I can find him he will do as I ask. You must promise him a safe conduct if he brings Madge here."

"Willingly," said Kenneth, "and forgive him all his sins, as far as I am concerned."

"Then I'll go to the ranges, and if Madge is with the Eureka gang I promise Captain Donnell shall bring her to Dimboola," he replied, to their great surprise.

CHAPTER XXIII.

A PERILOUS MISSION.

"If he finds the camp they will not allow him to leave the ranges again," said Kenneth Harvey, as he stood with Colin watching Captain Donnell riding away on his mission.

"He's taking his life in his hands," said Colin. "He's a brave man whoever he may be."

Kenneth Harvey looked at him quickly.

"He is James Connor, a horse-dealer," said Kenneth.

"That is how he describes himself, but I doubt it. I'd like to find out who he really is."

"It's strange he knows this Captain Donnell, and he must have great influence over him, if he can induce him to give up Madge."

"He promised Donnell should bring her back to Dimboola," said Colin.

"That's hardly likely, he'd not run his head into a noose."

"You promised him a safe conduct for Donnell, he will rely upon that."

"And he shall have it, but we shall have our work cut out to keep Schaaf's hands off him if he returns while he is here," said Kenneth.

"We must manage it somehow, it will never do to break faith with him," answered Colin.

"Then you think Donnell is sure to bring Madge if, as you suspect, she is in the hands of the gang?"

"Yes, for I am certain Connor, if that is his name, has a thorough knowledge of the man."

"We shall see," replied Kenneth. "Colin, my lad, I am sorry I was angry with you; you'll help me to find my girl?"

His voice shook, and Colin, who was also moved, said—

"We will find her, you may be sure of that. I do not think she will take any harm, and she is too brave a girl to be frightened."

Captain Donnell had no doubt that Colin's surmise was correct, and that some members of the Eureka gang had kidnapped Madge. He was enraged against them for committing such a piece of folly, and blamed Jake Hayes for allowing it. During his stay at Dimboola, and his trip to Sydney with Kenneth Harvey, he had gone back to the life he formerly led before he became an outlaw. It had caused him to reflect seriously on his position and present mode of living, until he became discontented, if not entirely disgusted with his lot. He liked Kenneth

Harvey and Colin, and all the hands at Dimboola had treated him well over the match, and during his stay on the station.

It would be some return for the kindness shown him if he could take Madge home, and hand her over to her father. He did not underestimate the difficulties and dangers of his task. How was he to accomplish it? He had no wish to deceive the gang by offering to take Madge to Dimboola, under pretext of receiving a stiff ransom for her. There was no chance of the man letting her go at his bidding without sufficient inducement in the way of money were offered. This he was unable to give, as his trip to Sydney had drained his pockets, and left him with very little money.

As he neared the ranges he determined to take Madge away by stealth. It could be done by a determined, fearless man, and he had never been wanting in courage. For his own life he cared little, but there must be no danger to Madge. With a fleet horse like Black Star under him, once they reached the open country they would be safe. The horse might be relied upon to carry his double burden, for he had no intention of risking the attempt with two horses.

Having decided upon his course of action, he was more contented and as he entered the ranges, whistled cheerfully, and seemed in high spirits. His approach was perceived by the man on the look-out, who at once returned hastily to the camp and reported.

Madge saw a considerable stir was taking place amongst the men, and thought Schnaf must be returning to the ranges. They whispered together and cast glances at her, she wondered what they would do.

Presently Seth Hart and Jake Hayes came to her, and the former said—

"You must come with us for a while, it is necessary to hide you in a safe place; we may be attacked, and we do not wish you to run any danger."

"Has Schaaf returned?" she asked.

Seth thought the excuse as good as another, so he answered "Yes," at which Madge danced with delight, and expressed a hope they would all be shot or taken.

Seth scowled at her as he replied—

"They're likely to suffer considerably more than we are."

"Oh, I hope not," said Madge.

They hurried her along a passage, and about half way down told her to go inside a cave in the rock, which had evidently been hewn out, and had a rude door, with a fastener attached, to fit into the opening. Light was admitted through a small aperture at the end opposite the door.

"You will be safe here," said Seth, "and we will not leave you alone longer than necessary."

"I shall not miss your company," replied Madge.

They fastened the door securely and left her.

Madge made the best of things and sat down on the rough bench, listening for the first shots to be fired.

The bushrangers hastily decided that at first it would be best to keep Madge's presence a secret from Captain Donnell, until they found out how the land lay. They wished to ascertain what had taken place at

Dimboola, on Kenneth Harvey's return, and when he discovered his daughter was missing.

They gave Captain Donnell a hearty welcome, eagerly questioning him about his adventures in Sydney, asking whether he had replenished his pockets during the excursion. He laughingly replied that he had no chance, and was glad to return with a whole skin.

"How did you get away from Dimboola?" asked Seth.

"There was trouble there when we got back," he said, "and I thought it better to go."

"What sort of trouble?" asked Jake.

"Kenneth Harvey's daughter is missing, and he thinks you have her in the ranges."

"Then he's mistaken," growled Jakes. "I only wish we had, she'd be worth something to us."

Captain Donnell laughed, as he looked the speaker in the face, and said—

"I think you've known me long enough not to take me for a fool. The girl's here right enough; the question is, what's to be done with her?"

"I tell you she's not here," said Jake.

"And I reply that she is. They found the dog, shot, near the water-hole, and it was easy enough to see the tramp of horses' hoofs; you don't half know your business, or you'd have tried to obliterate your tracks. You're mere children at the game," said Donnell.

His tone of contempt stung them, and angry glances were levelled at him.

"Scowl away," he laughed, "you know it's true. The dog's alive, you didn't half do your work."

Seth muttered an oath, and Captain Donnell, turning on him quickly, said—

"Then you do know something about the dog, Seth? It's curious you didn't see the girl at the same time, they are always together."

"And supposing the girl is here, what then?" asked Seth angrily.

"Yes, what then?" chorused the men.

"I must know if you have her before I give you any advice," he replied.

"And in case we don't want your advice?" said Seth.

Donnell shrugged his shoulders as he replied—

"Then it is of no use my giving it."

This was not what they wanted; they desired his help, knowing he was full of resource, and could advise them well if he wished.

"Tell him how we got hold of her," said Jake, and Seth Hart complied.

Captain Donnell listened to his tale attentively, and was glad to learn Madge was safe, and had been well cared for.

"Where is she?" he asked.

"In the hole down there," said Seth, pointing to the passage.

"Let me see her. She knows me by the name of James Connor."

"What'll you say to her?" asked one of the men.

"That depends upon what she says to me," he replied.

"Fetch her," said Seth to Jake Hayes, who went down the passage, and presently returned with Madge.

When she saw Captain Donnell she gave an exclamation of delighted surprise, then rushed up to him and said—

"I am glad to see you." Then, thinking how strange it was to find him there, she added, "Have they caught you too?"

The men laughed at her question, and Captain Donnell said—

"No, they have not kidnapped me. I'm rather too big and strong for them. I have come from Dimboola to see if you are well."

"Then my father has returned?" she asked.

"He has."

"Poor old dad, he'll be so sorry I am away. Does he know where I am?"

"He guessed it, or rather Colin did; they hunted everywhere for you before we returned."

"Have you come to take me away?" she asked.

The question startled the men, who looked at each other, and then at Donnell, who shook his head, and said—

"That depends upon what arrangements I can make with them."

"You know Captain Donnell," she said. "Point him out to me, they will not tell me which is the man."

He smiled as he replied—

"It is a secret; he prefers to remain unknown to strangers, it is safer."

"Is he here?" asked Madge.

"That I must not tell you," he answered.

"Has my father given you instructions to pay a ransom for me?" she asked.

"I am come about that. I do not think you will have to remain long. How have you been treated?"

"Oh, very well considering, but they are such a lot of bears, not a bit like our hands at Dimboola," she said.

He laughed, and looking at the men said—

"You ought to try and be more cheerful, especially in the presence of such a charming young lady."

"We've heard enough of this sort of talk," growled Seth. "Let her go back while we talk the matter over."

"Why cannot she remain? It concerns her," said Donnell.

"She's too sharp by half for her age," said Seth. "She's precious quick at picking up things, she might hear more than would be good for her to know."

"As you please," said Donnell. "You had better go back to your den," he said to Madge with a smile, "they will not keep you there long."

"I thought Schaaf and his men were coming," she said, looking at Seth; "you told me so."

"We thought they were, but found out afterwards it was this gentleman," said Seth.

"Then you cannot see very well if you took a single horseman for a body of mounted police," was Madge's comment, at which Donnell laughed, and Seth, being irritated, hurried her down the passage and fastened her in the cave again.

CHAPTER XXIV

THE ESCAPE

CAPTAIN DONNELL saw his only chance of fulfilling his promise was to escape from the ranges with Madge. This was a difficult task, and required considerable skill and ingenuity to accomplish. The gang were suspicious, on the alert. They expected Schaaf to return, and were doubtful about Donnell's intentions.

During the night he argued with them as to the ransom they should demand, and how it was to be arranged. Two days passed and he was still as far off as ever from carrying out his plan. The vigilance of the men never relaxed, they were constantly on the watch. Madge was allowed to roam about the camp, but not to stray out of sight. She was tired of her confinement, the novelty had worn off, and she pined for home and her father.

Captain Donnell tried in vain to speak to her unobserved, he knew it would arouse the gang's suspicion if he was seen in conversation with her.

Growing impatient, he decided on a bold stroke during the night.

"I think I'll return to Dimboola," he said. "I can concoct a story about meeting Captain Donnell and arranging for a ransom; they have not the least suspicion who I am."

"We won't take less than five thousand," said Seth.

"And if he refuses?"

"He will not."

"But in case he does, and proposes less, how much are you prepared to accept?"

"Four thousand is the lowest, not a penny less, but you'll easily get five, he'll not miss it," said Seth.

"Perhaps not, but he's a keen hand at a bargain, he'll want some security that she will be given up."

"Then he'll have to do without; we'll give her up right enough, and be glad to get rid of her."

Madge slept in a small hollow space in the rock in the main camp, and Donnell was not far from her.

He had his revolver and a couple of rifles handy.

In the middle of the night, it was pitch dark, he crawled out of the cave, fired two shots, and called for help, then rushing in made straight for Madge, and seizing her by the arm said—

"Don't make a sound. Come with me; I'll try and rescue you."

She recognised his voice and clung to him.

The shots roused the camp, causing great confusion. The men thought one of their sentinels upon the rocks had fired his rifle as a warning danger was near. They surmised it was Schaaf, bent on a night raid.

During the uproar Captain Donnell took Madge in his arms and carried her outside, stumbling as he went. He knew his way even in the darkness, and where Black Star stood ready for mounting, he had seen to this before he turned in. No notice was taken of it, as several horses were always saddled in case of emergency. Down the slope he slipped and scrambled, then putting Madge down, took firm hold of her wrist and dragged her along. She made no sound, even when her legs were cut by projecting rocks and her feet hurt with loose stones.

The uproar behind them increased, and lights appeared in the cave. Donnell knew it was now only a matter of a few minutes before their absence was discovered, and the hue and cry started. The men would guess what had happened when they missed him, as well as Madge, and their rage would know no bounds.

"Don't be afraid," he said to Madge. "Black Star is here, and we can easily outride them."

He reached the horse, and placing Madge in front of the saddle, mounted quickly, then told her to put her arms round him, pull herself forward, and hang on fast. This she did, and it left his hands free to urge Black Star down the dangerous path. The horse was surefooted, and although he slipped frequently, kept his ground, reached the bottom safely.

Captain Donnell commenced to breathe more freely; here they were at any rate on comparatively level ground.

Meantime Seth Hart and Jake Hayes missed Madge and the Captain, and a cry of rage came from the former.

"He's tricked us, curse him!" shouted Seth. "He's taken the girl with him. After him, men, or he'll escape."

When they recognized what had happened an angry roar broke from them, and in their eagerness they dashed wildly about, looking for their firearms, and saddling the horses. This caused some delay, and every minute was precious.

Seth and Jake Hayes were the first to mount and ride recklessly down the path; half way along the steep descent Jake's horse fell, and he rolled out of the saddle. Seth continued his way unheeding, his blood boiled, he gripped his rifle firmly.

Jake remounted with difficulty and followed him, more men were coming down the path eager to stop the fugitives. To be outwitted roused all their worst passions, and meant death to Captain Donnell if they came up with him.

No one knew this better than Donnell himself, and he urged Black Star forward recklessly. At last, just as it became light, he reached the pass leading to the open country.

The sentry posted near saw them and called out to him to stop.

Donnell made no reply, but pressed forward.

Seeing Madge with him the man guessed what had happened, and aimed at the horse, fortunately missing. Captain Donnell shouted to him, jeering at his failure, and rode on.

The plain was reached, and Black Star went at his utmost speed; behind them they heard shots and shouts, accompanied by the galloping of horses.

"They're after us, Madge, sit tight," he said.

She faced him, and looking behind saw Seth and Jake Hayes emerge from the pass.

"They're coming," she said. "Shall we beat them?"

"Certain," said Donnell cheerfully, but he knew there were rifles to be reckoned with, that most of the men were "dead shots," and their weapons had a long range.

Madge was no light weight, and Donnell was up to ten or eleven stone, but Black Star galloped easily, showing no sign of faltering.

"If we can reach the paddocks we shall be safe. Where's the gate to the first, Madge? He'll hardly top the timber with both of us on his back."

She looked round, it was quite light, and seeing in which direction they were riding, pointed to the left.

"Is it far from here?" he asked.

"A good way, three or four miles," she said.

"We shall do it," he replied. "Can you see any one behind?"

Madge looked and said—

"Two are in front of the others, one is the man they call Seth, the other Jake, the rest are some distance behind."

Captain Donnell knew Seth Hart rode a good horse, also that he was a light weight, and also a good shot, so was Jake.

The desperate race continued for three miles. Madge saw their pursuers were gaining, but were still some distance away.

Donnell caught sight of the first paddock fence, and looking to the left, perceived the gate, towards which he rode, urging the horse at top speed. He knew the gate would be fastened and that he might have to dismount; this would take time.

They reached the gate, and bidding Madge cling to the horse, he sprang from the saddle and tried to open it. There was a chain on, and it was locked. Drawing his revolver he fired at the padlock and broke it, then flinging the gate open he led Black Star through. Every moment was precious; he saw the men racing across the plain, drawing dangerously near. He must fasten the gate at all costs, and cause them some delay.

The chain was long, and twisting it tightly round he turned it over, making a knot which he pulled tight with all his strength, then he made a second knot, and putting his revolver in the loop for a lever, twisted it as firmly as possible.

"They'll not undo that in a hurry," he said.

As he spoke a shot rang out, and a bullet crashed into one of the bars of the gate.

"Too near to be pleasant," he said, as he ran to Black Star, and was in the saddle in a moment.

Another shot and a bullet whizzed past them.

Black Star was now going again at a great pace, and Seth and Jake Hayes were at the gate.

Levelling his rifle on the top of the gate, Seth Hart took deadly aim

at Donnell's back. He pulled the trigger, then gave an exclamation of joy.

"It's hit him, Jake ; we'll have them now."

Jake was pouring forth a volley of curses at the knotted chain, which he was vainly striving to undo.

"Smash the gate," shouted Seth.

This was easier said than done, it was stoutly built.

"We'll have to jump the fence," said Jake.

Seth had plenty of pluck, and mounting his horse, rode back and set him at the timber, which he cleared in clever style.

Jake Hayes tried to follow ; his horse struck the top rail heavily, and turning a somersault, fell on his rider. The horse broke his back in the fall, and crushed the life out of the bushranger ; Jake Hayes' course was run.

Two more men came up and scrambled over the fence ; three or four more dismounted, and finally succeeded in opening the gate. Without so much hardly as a look at the fallen man and horse, they rode on after their mates.

When Seth fired over the gate, Madge heard Donnell give a deep groan, and felt his arms relax on the reins ; she also heard a thud, and knew the bullet had struck him. Glancing into his face, she saw his teeth biting his lip until it bled, and his eyes denoted he was in pain.

"You're hit," she said, "and it's all my fault. Is it very bad ?"

He smiled faintly, as he replied in a strained voice—

"I'm hit in the back, but we'll get through all right. Hold on fast, little girl."

Captain Donnell felt his strength giving way, but he must go on to the end.

"It's my last ride," he thought, "but I'll fulfil my promise, Madge shall reach home safely ; then who cares what happens ?"

Seth was gaining on him fast. Black Star found his heavy burden troublesome, and his rider could not help him ; it took Donnell all his time to stick to the saddle.

Seth Hart saw Dimboola in the distance, and ground his teeth in his rage. Every yard took them into safety, himself into danger.

Reining in his horse, he again took aim and fired ; this time he missed.

Colin, out in the paddock, saw Black Star in the far distance, and the other men racing behind ; he heard Seth's shot, and guessed what was taking place. He rode back to the house, calling for help, and Kenneth Harvey, with Ben Cridge and other hands, quickly appeared.

"The Eureka gang !" yelled Colin at the top of his voice. "Quick, be quick. He's got Madge ; they're chasing him, and firing at him."

There was no need for more to be said. Kenneth Harvey rushed into the house for firearms, while the men quickly saddled the horses. In less time than it takes to tell, they were mounted, and riding at headlong speed towards Captain Donnell and his pursuers.

CHAPTER XXV

THE RECOGNITION

WHEN Seth Hart saw the men from the station riding towards him he knew the game was up. He was almost beside himself with rage at the thought of Donnell and Madge escaping. There was time for another shot. Pulling his horse up with a jerk, that threw it on its haunches, he waited until it stood still, and then levelled his rifle.

The shot rang out clear, and again took effect, hitting Donnell in the shoulder; his arm fell to his side, but he still urged Black Star forward. Colin was the first to reach him, and called to the men to ride hard after the bushrangers. They needed no encouragement. With yells that rolled over the plain they galloped on after the retreating gang.

Kenneth Harvey remained with Colin. Springing from his horse he took Madge in his arms, kissing her fondly, asking if she was hurt.

"I'm not hurt," she said, "but he is, he's been hit twice. Don't mind me, look after him; he saved me from them."

Captain Donnell swayed in the saddle, and would have fallen had not Colin supported him. Mr. Harvey gave a helping hand, and they lowered him to the ground.

"Are you badly hurt?" asked Kenneth anxiously.

"Shot twice; I'm done for, I think," he replied, with a faint smile.

"You must not say that. We'll take you home. Julia will see to you; she is a rare doctor," said Kenneth. Then turning to Colin, he told him to ride to Dimboola for the buggy.

Kenneth Harvey supported Donnell's head as he lay on the ground, and asked where he was hit.

"In the back and the shoulder. I fancy one bullet has pierced a lung; I can hardly breathe," he replied.

Madge looked at him wistfully, then knelt at his side and took his hand.

Donnell smiled at her faintly as he said—

"You're safe; I'm glad of that. We had a hard ride for it, had we not?"

"Indeed we had," said Madge, "and Black Star is a wonder."

He seemed faint, and Kenneth Harvey motioned to her to be quiet.

Colin was not long in returning with the buggy, and they took him to the homestead, where Julia was already prepared for him.

She examined the wounds, and dressed them, staunching the flow of blood, but her skill did not extend to the extracting of bullets.

Captain Donnell became restless and feverish, Julia administering a soothing draught which soon had the desired effect, and he fell asleep.

A consultation was held as to what they ought to do for the best, and Kenneth suggested Colin should ride to Moraine for the doctor.

Julia shook her head as she said—

"It will do no good."

Kenneth started as he asked in a low voice—

"Do you think he'll die?"

She nodded, as she replied—

"I'm sure of it, he has death written on his face."

Madge cried bitterly at this, and Julia took her out of the room.

"I think you had better ride to Moraine," said Kenneth; "there may be a chance;" and Colin went.

Madge told her father briefly all that had befallen her, and how it was entirely her fault she had been captured by the bushrangers.

"It's all through me he's been wounded. Oh, I hope he will not die!" she said.

"We must try and save him," said Kenneth.

"He's a brave man; tell me how he rescued you."

Madge explained as well as she knew how.

"He roused me out of my sleep last night," she said, "carried me down the rocky path to where Black Star was saddled, and we rode away together. The sentinel on the rocks fired at us and missed. It was a terrible ride. A man they call Seth fired at him over the gate, the bullet striking him in the back. I knew he was hit; but he stuck to the horse and rode on. He shielded me with his body, or I must have been hit."

"Did he seem to know the bushrangers?" asked Kenneth.

"Yes, he found his way there alone," she replied.

"Did you see Captain Donnell?"

"I must have done, but he was never addressed by that name. I think the man they call Seth Hart must be the one," she said.

"Then I expect he could not induce Donnell to part with you, so determined to rescue you himself. It is a brave deed. I shall never forget it," said Kenneth.

On his way to Moraine, Colin met Schaaf and some of his men riding towards Dimboola. The rioting was over at Golden Lead mines, and he was anxious to get on the track of the bushrangers.

Colin hastily explained what had taken place, and how he was riding to Moraine for the doctor.

"Let me send one of my men, and return to Dimboola with me," said Schaaf.

After some hesitation Colin consented; he thought perhaps he might render assistance, and the constable would bring the doctor as quickly as possible.

Schaaf gave one of the men his orders, and he galloped off in the direction of Moraine.

They arrived at Dimboola in the afternoon, and Kenneth Harvey was glad to see them. Colin explained that a constable had been sent back by Schaaf for the doctor.

After some conversation, Schaaf said—

"Where is the wounded man? Perhaps I can do something for him. I'm accustomed to bullet wounds," he added grimly.

Kenneth said he was asleep at present and must not be disturbed.

"It seems a strange thing that he found his way to the bushranger's camp alone," said Schaaf; "he must have been there before."

"He knows this Captain Donnell, probably he has," replied Kenneth. "He assured me before he went to the ranges that Donnell would bring Madge to Dimboola."

"Captain Donnell bring her!" exclaimed the Sergeant. "Not likely."

"I promised him a safe conduct if he did; but I should have had to keep him out of your way," said Kenneth.

Schaaf smiled grimly as he said—

"You'd have had a job to do that. It would have been too good a chance to be missed."

"You would not have taken him," replied Kenneth firmly. "Having given my word, and made myself responsible for his safety, I would have seen to it."

Schaaf gave an impatient exclamation as he said—

"Such men deserve to be taken by fair means or foul."

"Possibly, but in this case they would have had to be fair, or none at all," replied Kenneth.

"As the Captain did not bring her back we need not discuss the matter further," said Schaaf, "but I must find out how this Mr.—what is his name?"

"James Connor," said Kenneth.

"How he found his way to the Eureka gang's camp."

"I don't think he'll give you any information that will lead to the capture of Donnell," said Kenneth, "although the man's refusal to bring Madge in, or let her go, may have changed his mind towards him."

"His life must be saved," said Schaaf, "he is too useful to lose."

Kenneth looked at him in disgust. Schaaf's sole object in wishing Connor's life to be spared was to gain information from him as to the haunt of the bushrangers. The man who had so bravely rescued Madge was to Kenneth a hero, and he resented the Sergeant's callousness.

The hands returned after an unsuccessful pursuit of the gang, but they found the dead bodies of Jake Hayes and his horse.

When Ben Cridge related how they came across the dead man, Sergeant Schaaf said—

"There's one less to get hold of anyway. I wish we had arrived a few hours earlier, we might have bagged the lot."

It was late when Doctor Smithson arrived with the constable, and Kenneth at once took him to see Donnell.

When they entered the room the Captain was awake, and looked at them with inquiring eyes.

"I have brought Dr. Smithson to see you," said Kenneth calmly. "He will relieve you of pain, I am sure, and may extract the bullets when you are well enough."

Donnell smiled as he said—

"Better leave them where they are, doctor, it will save you trouble and me pain. I'm done for, I know it."

Doctor Smithson had been at Moraine some years, and during that

time had seen many bad shooting cases at Golden Lead mines. He was a skilful surgeon, taking a pride in his profession, and had studied deeply and thoughtfully. As he looked at Donnell's face, and felt his pulse, he came to the conclusion his patient was probably correct in his surmise, in any case he was in a bad way. His face, however, betrayed nothing of his thoughts, and he replied cheerfully—

"You must not give up hope. I have not examined the wounds; they may not be so dangerous as you think."

Donnell smiled as he answered—

"You can examine them, of course, but it will make no difference. I'm bleeding to death internally. It may as well end this way as any other, perhaps better. I have lost my life trying to do a good action and keep my word; there's something in that."

"Leave me with him for a short time," said the doctor.

"Shall I send Julia to you?" Kenneth asked. "She's a handy woman."

"No, not at present. I'll call if I want any assistance."

Kenneth left the room and joined Schaaf and Colin again.

Dr. Smithson remained alone with Donnell for half-an-hour or more, making a thorough examination of his wounds, and finding his condition dangerous.

"Well, I'm right, eh, doctor?" asked Donnell.

"You mean you will not pull through?"

"That's about it."

"They are bad wounds," said the doctor evasively.

"You're right."

"But I have seen men get better who have had worse wounds than yours."

"Then some one performed a miracle," said Donnell.

"Hardly that," replied the doctor, smiling. "Science and a moderate amount of skill helped."

"You are modest, doctor."

"Am I? It is better to profess too little than too much."

"Most men put it the other way about."

"That's your experience of life?"

"Yes."

"Are you in much pain?"

"Not at present, but I'd like to sleep again."

"You shall; it will rest you, and bring back strength," said Dr. Smithson as he opened his bag.

Going to the washstand he mixed a draught for him, which soon after being administered had the desired effect.

The doctor sat down, watching his patient, wondering what manner of man this was who faced the prospect of death so coolly. He thought it a strong, determined face, but the features did not altogether please him, there were signs of a hard life in them, a troubled career, something he tried in vain to give a name to.

A knock at the door roused him. Opening it he saw Kenneth Harvey and the Sergeant.

"Hush, no noise; he's asleep," said the doctor.

Captain Donnell lay on his back, his face turned towards the door.

As Kenneth turned away, Sergeant Schaaf had a full view of the wounded man.

When he saw his face he gave an exclamation of surprise, and was about to step into the room.

"You must not come in," said Dr. Smithson sternly.

The Sergeant hesitated, then followed Kenneth Harvey.

"Do you know who that man is?" he asked.

"James Connor," replied Kenneth.

"It's Captain Donnell," was the astounding answer.

CHAPTER XXVI

DONNELL'S OPINION OF SCHAAF

KENNETH HARVEY was amazed at Sergeant Schaaf's declaration that the wounded man was the notorious bushranger, Captain Donnell. He did not believe it, and smiled incredulously. Schaaf unbuttoned his coat, then, taking a photograph from his inner pocket, handed it to Kenneth.

"Who is that?" he asked.

"James Connor," replied Kenneth.

"It is a very good portrait of Captain James Donnell," was Schaaf's reply. "You can have no doubt as to his identity now."

"I cannot believe it," said Kenneth. "He has been with me to Sydney. I know him well. He behaved like a gentleman. He cannot be Donnell; it is a case of an extraordinary likeness."

"Not at all," replied Schaaf. "You see he is in the uniform of his regiment. This was taken before he left the service; he has not changed much."

"I must find out the truth; leave it to me," said Kenneth.

"You must acknowledge he is my prisoner. I shall not let him escape; dead or alive, he is mine," said Schaaf.

"I shall do nothing of the sort," answered Kenneth angrily. "If he is Captain Donnell, he is a brave man. He rescued my girl at the peril of his life, and I will protect him."

Schaaf smiled as he replied—

"You cannot, it would be interfering with the police in the execution of their duty."

"Damn the police!" said Kenneth savagely.

"I have no wish to make things unpleasant," said Schaaf. "This man will not be allowed to leave here except under escort."

"If he lives he will," said Kenneth Harvey, "and you will consent to it."

Sergeant Schaaf laughed as he replied—

"You are mistaken, I am not likely to consent."

"Then I shall have to inform the police authorities who Sergeant Schaaf is," said Kenneth calmly.

Schaaf started, then looked at him keenly.

"What do you mean?" he asked.

"There is no occasion to explain; I will merely say that Donnell left his regiment to join the bushrangers, and Brian Schaaf left an unlawful occupation to join the police force," said Kenneth.

The Sergeant protested angrily, and Kenneth interrupting him, said—

"Don't lose your temper. I know all about your career before you left Victoria; I don't think you would care for it to be made public."

Schaaf controlled himself; it would not do to quarrel with Mr. Harvey, he knew too much. At the same time he determined he would not let Captain Donnell escape.

The knowledge that James Connor and Captain Donnell were probably one and the same, troubled Kenneth Harvey. He had formed a very different idea of the bushranger. During their trip to Sydney he had grown to like the man, respect him, and regarded him as a boon companion. The tales he had heard of Captain Donnell were in total variance with the man as he had found him. He thought of Connor's promise that Captain Donnell would bring Madge back to Dimboola. He guessed what had happened. If Connor really was Captain Donnell, he had probably demanded that Madge should be sent home, and on receiving a refusal determined to escape with her. This action on his part determined Kenneth Harvey to protect him, no matter who he might be. He was, however, anxious to learn the truth from the man himself.

The next day Donnell was easier, and asked Dr. Smithson if he could see Kenneth Harvey.

"You had better remain quiet for a few days," was the reply.

"That will be too late. It is useless trying to deceive me," said Donnell. "I am a dying man; I know it. I must see Mr. Harvey."

"Very well, I will tell him," said the doctor, as he left the room.

Kenneth Harvey came at once, and sitting at the bedside said—

"You sent for me. What can I do for you?"

"Not much, I merely wish to remove a false impression, and to thank you for your kindness."

"Any little kindness or hospitality you have had at my hands has been repaid a thousand times by what you have done for me," replied Kenneth.

"You thought I was asleep when you looked in at the door yesterday," said Donnell, smiling. "I was not. I saw your companion. He recognised me; I saw that too. It was Sergeant Schaaf. Has he told you anything about me?"

"He made a ridiculous assertion," said Kenneth. "He informed me you were Captain Donnell, and I laughed at him."

"He was right, I am Captain Donnell; not quite the sort of man you imagined him to be from your remarks," he added, smiling.

"I don't care who or what you are," said Kenneth. "You have proved yourself a man of your word, and risked your life to save my child, and neither Schaaf nor any of his men shall touch you while you are at Dimboola."

Captain Donnell's face was a study in various emotions. At last, controlling his feelings, he said, as he feebly put out his hand—

"Will you take it now you know who I am?"

Kenneth Harvey grasped his hand and said—

"Willingly, and I do not believe the vile stories I have heard about you."

"Thank you," replied Donnell simply. "Mr. Harvey, I solemnly declare to you I have never raised my hand against woman or child, or taken from those who could not afford to lose. I have not killed any man in cold blood, although I have had to fight for my life, and accidents will happen. If you knew my story you would rather pity than blame me. I was cashiered from the army for an offence I did not commit, when a promising career was opening out before me. This injustice embittered my whole life, and I took to the bush to be revenged upon a society that flouted me. It has not been a happy life; my companions, as you may imagine, were not congenial, and the knowledge that I was nothing better than a thief haunted me day and night. When I came to Dimboola, it was with the intention of spying out the land, and ascertaining all about Schaaf's movements. We knew he was about to make an attack upon us, and I determined to resist it."

"My stay here changed my nature. I saw how you lived and again tasted the sweets of civilized life. I longed to leave my unlawful occupation and live a decent life, but this was impossible; a man with a price upon his head has no chance to reform. When I heard Madge was missing, I knew the Eureka gang must have kidnapped her, and I decided to restore her to you at any cost, because of the kindness you had shown me. It was hopeless to try and get the gang to allow her to return with me to Dimboola. They demanded a heavy ransom, which I determined you should not be called upon to pay. How we escaped you have heard from Madge, but she has but a faint idea of the difficulties and dangers of the undertaking. I am glad I have been able to do one good action, and it may lessen the contempt and detestation in which you, as a straight goer, must hold me. Schaaf, no doubt, thinks he has me safe here. He is mistaken. I shall escape him easily, by a road he will not follow. Outlaw that I am, I would not change places with that man; he is a bully, and has been a thief—I know it."

"So do I," said Mr Harvey. "I have told him sufficient to indicate I know all about him, and he will not attempt to take you in this house. When you leave I will see you have a chance to get away; afterwards you must look out for yourself."

Donnell smiled as he said quietly—

"My escape will be easy; even Schaaf will not be allowed to wreak his vengeance on a dead man. I only ask one thing of you; grant it or not, as you think fit. Will you bury me near Dimboola, so that I may lie near the place where I have done something, however little, to atone for my misdeeds?"

"We will not talk of that," said Kenneth. "You are not a dead man yet, far from it."

"Promise what I ask," said Donnell, "if you can."

Kenneth Harvey, seeing he was in earnest, gave the desired assurance, and Donnell was satisfied.

"May I see Schaaf for a few minutes?" he asked. "He cannot arrest me here," he added, as he saw Kenneth start.

"Is it advisable to see him?"

"Yes."

Kenneth Harvey left the room, and soon after Sergeant Schaaf came in.

"You think you have me safe at last, eh, Schaaf?" he asked.

The Sergeant nodded, then said—

"I must do my duty."

"Have you always done it?" asked Donnell.

"I place duty before everything."

"Since when did you commence to do so?"

"I'm not here to answer impertinent questions," said Schaaf angrily.

"I can put some very pertinent questions to you about your career before you joined the police," said Donnell.

"You have no occasion to talk," said Schaaf gruffly.

"No, we're birds of a feather, eh, Sergeant?"

"I'd be sorry to class myself with the likes of you," said Schaaf angrily.

"You couldn't do it; you're not in the same class at all, Schaaf, you're in a considerably lower grade. I'm glad of it. I'm dying, Sergeant. That's bad news for you, and you'll not try and follow me far along the road I'm going. Anyway, I hope I shall not have the pleasure of meeting you again in this world or in the next, if you do not improve."

"Dead or alive it's all one to me," said Schaaf brutally. "You'll be worth a couple of hundred pounds; that's more than I'd care to give for you."

Captain Donnell's eyes flashed.

"You're a coward," he said. "If I was on Black Star and had all my strength you'd not dare to face me without you had half-a-dozen troopers round you."

Sergeant Schaaf laughed as he said—

"You may die, and you may live, it's all the same to me."

A sudden fear possessed Donnell. What if Schaaf demanded his body to be surrendered to him? could Kenneth Harvey resist?

"You can claim the reward if you have proof of my death at your hands," he said, "but not without."

Sergeant Schaaf started. This was true; he might lose the reward after all.

"On one condition I'll give you sufficient proof that you arrested me, that I died here while in your custody, then you can claim your blood money," said Donnell bitterly.

"It's not blood money," said Schaaf angrily.

"Call it what you like, that's the name I give it," replied Donnell.

"Will you agree to my terms?"

"What are they?"

"Mr. Harvey has promised to bury me near Dimboola. I wish to lie where I have spent some happy days. If you permit this I will sign any document you care to draw up, stating that you apprehended me, and that I died in custody from wounds received, you need not say how," said Donnell.

This was an opportunity not to be missed. If he recovered, after signing such a document, Kenneth Harvey would find it a hard matter

to evade the law; if Donnell died it ensured the Sergeant getting the reward. He consented to Donnell's terms, saying callously—

"It will be an easy way of getting rid of you, in case you peg out, and if Mr. Harvey sees fit to accommodate you on his land, well and good."

"Sergeant Schaaf," called out Donnell, as he rose to leave the room.

Schaaf halted.

"Draw that document up at once—I shan't last much longer."

Schaaf nodded, and turned towards the door again.

"Oh, Schaaf, one moment," called Donnell.

"What is it?" asked the Sergeant impatiently.

"I wanted to tell you that you're the most brutal, ill-bred blackguard I ever met, and I've come across some queer fellows in the course of a chequered career. That's all. You may go," said Donnell with a slight laugh.

Schaaf, muttering an oath, hastily quitted the room.

CHAPTER XXVII

FACE TO FACE

CAPTAIN DONNELL was buried at Dimboola in accordance with the promise given him by Kenneth Harvey, and many tears were shed over his grave by Madge. He only lived a few hours after signing the document drawn up by Sergeant Schaaf, who claimed his reward, and received it.

The members of the Eureka gang, finding the ranges unsafe, changed their quarters, splitting up into small parties, and clearing out of the country, with the exception of Seth Hart and a man named Abe Scarr, who threw in his lot with him.

Sergeant Schaaf discovered their retreat, but the birds had flown; he also found the body of Jake Hayes, and received a share of the reward offered for him.

Schaaf gave Kenneth Harvey an account of the disturbances at Golden Lead mines.

"There are too many grog shanties there," said Schaaf, "and money's plentiful. You know what the miners are when bent on a 'wild jag.' They are not bad fellows, and I know how to handle them."

"Any shooting?" asked Kenneth.

"Some; but no one fatally injured this time."

"They had calmed down when you left," said Kenneth.

"Quite. What do you think they were up to when I came away?"

"Organizing a ball to square up old feuds?"

"No, they were in deadly earnest about getting up a race meeting, and they'll have it too, take my word for it. There are some good horses in the place, and you know how they gamble when the fever's on them," said Schaaf.

"I'm glad of it, it will keep them out of mischief," replied Kenneth. "When is it to take place?"

"As soon as they can fix things up, and it will not take them long."

"I'll go over and see if I can assist them; Colin knows something about race meetings, I'll take him with me."

Sergeant Schaaf decided it would be to his advantage to let Colin alone, and try and forget what had happened between them.

"They ought to have a race for the mounted police," said Schaaf, laughing.

"I have no doubt they will allow your men to run their horses in some of the events," said Kenneth. "I'll put the matter to them."

When the hands at Dimboola heard there was a prospect of a race meeting being held at the mines, or at Moraine, they were anxious for the project to be carried through.

Captain Donnell had given Black Star to Kenneth Harvey, and there was his old opponent Maneroo in fine condition, so that there would be no lack of runners from the station, as most of the hands were well mounted.

"How did the riot commence? Who started it?" asked Kenneth, determined to give the ringleaders a bit of his mind if he discovered who they were.

"From what I could gather it appears a man from Sydney, a new arrival in the country, I believe, came to Golden Lead. He had money, and bought three or four claims right out, and took shares in one or two more. He spent cash freely and treated all the miners liberally. This he did to gain information as to the best claims, and he succeeded. Ned Crawley got very drunk, and sold his claim to the stranger for about half its value. He spent the money. When he became sober he swore he had been swindled, and the first time he met the man who had bought him out he tackled him with it. There was a row, a scuffle, then a general fight, in which Ned and the stranger got mauled considerably. Two parties were formed in the camp, one led by Ned, the other financed by the stranger. That's how the fun started, but I made peace between them before I left."

"Did you hear the stranger's name?" asked Kenneth.

"No, but you'll easily recognize him—that is, if he is still there. I rather fancy he'll clear out. He seemed to me a superior sort of man, but you never can tell what these new-comers from Sydney are; he may have been sent by a syndicate to exploit the place."

"Probably," replied Kenneth. "In any case it's time I visited our mines. If he's still there I'll soon settle his business for him; we can't have stranger's causing dissensions there. I'll frighten him; point out that the place is too hot to hold him; that it might be dangerous for him to remain there."

Schaaf returned to Abergyle with his men, saying they would be at Moraine or Golden Lead when the races were on in order to keep things quiet.

Kenneth Harvey and Colin rode over to Moraine, and from there to the mines. It was Colin's first visit to a big mining field, and he was much interested in all he saw.

Kenneth Harvey was popular with the miners, and his appearance amongst them was hailed with delight. He treated them liberally, but never encouraged them in over-indulgence. Ned Crawley explained to him that they had decided to hold the races at Moraine, as there was a better ground at the township than at the mines.

Ned, recovered from his spree, instead of bemoaning his losses, set to work to make another pile, and had already succeeded in getting a half-share in a good claim.

Kenneth told him he had made a fool of himself when he sold out to the stranger, and a still greater mistake when he spent the money he received.

"He's a cute 'un, he is," said Ned. "He plied me with drink until

I didn't know what I was doing. It was a downright swindle, nothing less."

"Hardly that, if he paid you all you asked."

"He'd have had no chance of getting it if I'd been sober."

"Is he here?" asked Kenneth.

"For all I know he is, but he's been keeping dark lately. I fancy he was knocked about a bit," said Ned, with a wink.

Kenneth Harvey asked the miners, who were anxious to arrange the race meeting, to come to the Diggers' Rest at Moraine and talk the matter over. This they did, and Harry Ranger, the host, made them all welcome, attending the gathering, and promising to do all in his power to make it a success.

Kenneth Harvey promised to give a couple of hundred pounds for a race to be called The Dimboola Purse, distance two miles, and his announcement was greeted with tremendous cheering.

"That's a grand start," said Ned Crawley. "We must work up to it, boys. I'm not a rich man myself, having been fleeced pretty considerably of late," a statement greeted with much laughter, "but I'll give my tenner if all you boys join in."

The score or so of miners in the room agreed to this, and it was also suggested a canvass should be made at the mines.

Then Harry Ranger came forward with an offer of a hundred for a Diggers' Rest Plate, his gift being greeted with a roar of applause.

"We'll have as good a meeting as any of the up-country fellows," said one.

"And we must keep the thing going now it's started; this will be only one meeting out of many, I hope," said another, a sentiment that was warmly approved. Perfect harmony characterized the proceedings, and Colin, after some time had elapsed, said he had a suggestion to make.

Ned Crawley remarked anything he wished to say would be welcome.

"As we have no correct idea of the merits of the horses that will run, I think we ought to decide to have catch weights, but no one to ride less than nine stone. I weigh about ten stone, I think, and I expect most of the men who will ride will weigh between nine and ten stone, or a trifle more. What do you think of it?"

The suggestion was voted to be an admirable one, and unanimously adopted. Kenneth Harvey said that it was his intention to run two or three horses. They were well bred, probably better than any of the miners' horses, and if they thought the Dimboola representatives ought to be handicapped he was quite willing to consent to it. To avoid trouble it might be a time handicap, so many seconds' start; that would do away with all questions of weight."

Colin thought the proposal fair, as the Dimboola horses were all in good condition.

"You'll find we have some smart ones here," said Harry Ranger. "I don't think you'll want to give much away when you see one or two of mine."

Kenneth laughed as he replied—

"Perhaps you can give my lot a start."

"I don't say that, but I can promise you a good race. I have a

couple here that were bred at Dimboola, so they'll do you credit if they run well," said Harry.

"The best plan will be to decide what allowance is to be made, if any, when we see the horses and riders," said Colin. "It will not take long, and be the fairest way of judging."

"A capital idea," said Kenneth, and they agreed with him.

It was decided to have five races, and at Kenneth's suggestion the mounted police were to be allowed to enter in two of the events. At first there was some demur about this, for Schaaf was unpopular, but Kenneth said they ought not to allow their prejudice against him to injure his men, which they speedily recognized as just.

After the meeting broke up Kenneth and Colin remained at the Diggers' Rest for the night.

"Any visitors in the house, Harry?" asked Kenneth.

"Yes, there's one, he's from Sydney. It's the man who caused the row at the mines, at least he started it, although I'm not saying it was his fault. As Ned Crawley was ass enough to sell out at a ridiculous price, he ought to have stood the racket and not grumbled."

"How long's he been here?"

"On and off for some days. He comes and goes. I fancy he's got an eye on another claim or two."

"What's he like?"

"Like?" said Harry, looking out of the open doorway. "You can judge for yourself; he's coming across now—that's him."

They looked, and saw the stranger walking slowly towards the Diggers' Rest. As he came nearer, Colin fancied he had seen some one very like him, a long time ago. The man came on, his head down, evidently in deep thought.

As he entered the hall he looked up and faced Colin, who was standing directly in front of him. The stranger started, giving an exclamation of surprise, and turned pale, then an evil look came into his eyes.

Colin also seemed dazed, unable to speak, staring at him with wondering eyes.

"You appear to have met before," said Kenneth.

His voice roused Colin, who said—

"We have, years ago. Mr. Harvey, this is my half-brother, Clarence Newly."

CHAPTER XXVIII

THE MORNING OF THE FACES

WHEN Colin recovered from his surprise he greeted Clarence in a friendly way, to which his half-brother made a slow response.

Clarence Newly little expected to see Colin at such an outlandish place as Moraine; he was, moreover, the last person he desired to meet.

When he left London he hesitated for some time as to where he should go, eventually deciding on a voyage to Australia, as favourable reports had recently been circulated in the press about the gold discoveries out West, in New South Wales. He had money, having feathered his nest at his father's expense, and being unscrupulous, his conscience gave him little trouble. Landing in Sydney he soon made himself familiar with the most likely mining centres to make money in. Moraine and the Golden Lead mining district was reported to be the best for speculators, and thither he went. His deals with Ned Crawley and other miners have been related, and he soon found himself in possession of some profitable claims.

His meeting with Colin came as a severe shock; he had come to the conclusion his half-brother was dead, as no news had been received from him for so many years.

Soon after his arrival in Sydney, he determined upon a dastardly scheme for revenging the slight put upon him by Norah Marden. He was an expert penman, copying handwriting was easy to him, and he knew Colin's writing well; he did not think it would have changed much in ten years, even if by chance he still lived and had written home.

He wrote a subtle letter, purporting to be penned by Colin, and addressed to Norah Marden.

In it he asked her, if she still had faith in his innocence, to come out to Sydney. He said he had always loved her, and that he had made a fortune, and wanted to marry her. This was the tenor of the letter, written in a straightforward, devoted way, that Clarence felt would appeal to her. He had heard her say she loved Colin, and had very little doubt as to what her decision would be. He further added, as an additional inducement, that if she brought word that the real forger had been discovered, he would return to England with her if she wished, but that under no circumstances would he do so unless she showed her trust and love for him by coming out and marrying him.

It was a cunningly worded letter, and Clarence Newly, as he signed Colin's name to a fair copy, regarded it with satisfaction.

When he so unexpectedly encountered Colin at Moraine he had already received a reply from Norah, that she would come out to Sydney in the Firefly, and that she had ample proof of his, Colin's, innocence.

The Firefly was due to arrive in Sydney in about a fortnight, and he at once recognized the danger he was in if Colin heard of Norah's presence in the Colony, and the means by which she had been induced to come out.

Clarence had no doubt when he wrote his letter that once he had Norah in Sydney he could force her to marry him. When she produced the letter, supposed to be written by Colin, he could frame a plausible tale that Colin was dead, and that the only thing for her to do was to accept him in his place. He little knew Norah Marden, or he would not have been so confident of the success of his plan.

Clarence decided it would be better to act in a friendly way towards Colin; that would give him time to decide what was best to be done. He had not destroyed the letter he received from Norah, addressed to Colin; why he kept it he hardly knew, but he thought it might come in useful to prove Colin's death; he could say he had received it from him, with instructions to meet her at the boat. He could explain that Colin met with a fatal accident soon after receiving it; anyway he would get out of the difficulty somehow.

Kenneth Harvey left them together, thinking what an extraordinary meeting it was, and that fate was a clever juggler. Had he known the true facts he would have wondered still more. Clarence explained, in his own way, how he had left London at his father's suggestion to speculate in mining property, a feasible tale which Colin believed. He then went on to tell of his purchases at Golden Lead, and the row following the deals.

Colin asked many questions about home, all of which Clarence answered to suit his own ends, and then gave him an account of his connection with Kenneth Harvey.

A straightforward, open-hearted man like Colin could not help being pleased to see even Clarence Newly, after such a long separation. They talked together for a long time, and when Kenneth Harvey joined them they were apparently on good terms.

Clarence explained how he was situated to Mr. Harvey, winning his confidence by his apparent sincerity.

When the coming race meeting was touched upon, Kenneth suggested it would be a good way to win the favourable opinion of the miners for Clarence to contribute liberally to the funds, and this he agreed to do.

Clarence Newly had very little sleep that night; he lay concocting devilish schemes to get rid of Colin. He knew if his half-brother discovered his perfidy, in regard to Norah, and also himself, there would be no quarter shown him. He also knew how lawless the miners were, that life was not of much account, that men were shot and very few questions asked. If a disturbance took place at the race meeting, it might be easy to settle Colin with a revolver shot, and no one be any the wiser; it would be put down as a deplorable accident, and he—Clarence—would mourn his loss deeply. There would be much drinking after the meeting, when the settling took place,

and a brawl was almost certain to take place without much provocation.

Nearly every one at Golden Lead went about armed, for robberies were frequent, and the country was infested by many desperate men who preyed upon the community. Cards were played for high stakes, an accusation of cheating would at once light a fire that would burn like tinder, and although Colin might not be implicated, it would be comparatively easy for him to fall a victim to a chance bullet.

Clarence pondered over these things, and came to the conclusion Colin might be put out of the way with very little difficulty or danger of detection. At one time he would have shrunk from such a deed; but ill-doing had hardened him, deadened what little conscience he had left, and now he was all for self, at any price. The man who deliberately robbed his father was not likely to stick at trifles where a half-brother he hated was concerned and was in the way.

Matters stood thus when the day for the miners' race meeting arrived. All over the district the event excited great interest, and men rode many miles to Moraine to be present. There were visitors even from Sydney, and all the townships sent contingents, while the squatters and their hands mustered in strong force. Every house in Moraine was crowded with visitors, who were received with true colonial hospitality, which in cases of this kind is boundless. Harry Ranger had much difficulty in finding accommodation for one quarter of the people who asked to be put up. Every room in the house, at night, contained beds and "shake downs," even the verandahs were occupied by sleeping men who were accustomed to camping out, and thought nothing of it.

There was much speculation over the various events, wagers between owners being freely laid to considerable sums. The bulk of the miners were in funds, and drank and gambled to their hearts' content. The squatters bet with each other, backing their respective horses, the hands followed suit, and the Dimboola men were always ready to back their champions, Black Star and Maneroo; Kenneth Harvey decided not to enter more, and neither were in the Dimboola Purse, for which he had given the stake. Both, however, were entered in the Diggers' Rest Plate, run over a similar distance, two miles.

As Clarence Newly watched the surging crowd, in the one street in Moraine, he smiled quietly, thinking that in such a rough throng it would not be difficult for him to act.

He had taken Kenneth Harvey's advice and contributed freely to the race fund, thereby causing a reaction in his favour.

The miners easily forgave and forgot differences, and Ned Crawley was one of the first to thank Clarence for his assistance. They were far superior in morals and large-heartedness to the cynical man, who looked upon them with a lip curled in contempt; not one of them, even the roughest, would have been guilty of plotting such a deed as Clarence Newly calmly contemplated. There must have been bad blood in him, but where it came from it is hard to surmise.

Colin and Kenneth Harvey were centres of attraction. The former was to ride Black Star or Maneroo, in consequence of which he was followed about by an admiring crowd. The owner of Dimboola was

always ready to back his horses for a friendly wager ; it was a genuine sporting affair, no regular bookmaking, no thought of stiff running, every man having a horse entered was anxious to win, or at least for his animal to run respectably.

The night before the races had been one of boisterous merriment. Men who had not met for months greeted each other heartily, and went to the Diggers' Rest, which much belied its name on this occasion. Even Sergeant Schaaf was met with a flow of good-humoured chaff which he was sufficiently wise not to resent. As for his troopers, they were having a very good time indeed, and would not have been of much use in quieting a crowd, the members of which they so freely fraternized with.

Clarénce Newly saw the potations of the night induced thirst on the race morning, and he calculated that by night time things would be riotously lively.

Schaaf, too, saw the miners were getting out of hand, and probably trouble was brewing ; he, however, hoped for the best.

The presence of ladies from the various stations and townships, however, had a beneficial influence on the crowd, who kept their mirth within bounds in their presence. Madge was there, and there was no danger of any harm befalling her, so well was she looked after by the hands from Dimboola, her father and Colin, not to mention sundry others, who had heard of her capture by the Eureka gang ; of her escape, and her courageous behaviour.

As the morning wore on the merriment increased, and by the time racing commenced the excitement rose to fever pitch.

CHAPTER XXIX

AFTER MANEROO'S RACE

THE Dimboola Purse was won by a horse owned by Harry Ranger after a great finish with the miners' representative, and one of the mounted police secured another event.

The chief excitement centred round the Diggers' Rest Plate, for which Black Star and Maneroo were to run; Colin having decided to ride Maneroo, his own horse; Black Star was to be ridden by Ben Cridge. Fourteen horses were entered, and the one most fancied by the miners was Nugget, owned by Ned Crawley, who was to ride him.

One race out of the three decided had fallen to a miner, and they were anxious for Ned to win on Nugget.

Jack Tipton, the coach-driver, had a horse entered, and secured Bill Blower to ride. Most of the others belonged to residents in Moraine and to miners.

Clarence Newly fancied Black Star, having heard the horse had beaten Maneroo in the race at Dimboola, and he backed it freely against sundry others, including Colin's mount.

The course was fairly good, considering it had been hastily measured out on the level ground, at the back of the Diggers' Rest. It was lumpy and hard, but the horses were used to this kind of going.

Colin knew he would have a hard task to beat Black Star. Ben was about the same weight, perhaps a trifle lighter, and Maneroo could not give much away. They were to start level, ten seconds behind the others, this being the handicap allotted.

Nugget was a wiry-looking horse, a little one compared with Maneroo, but game and well-bred. Ned was reticent as to where he picked him up, and had been chaffed about buying him from a bush-ranger.

Kenneth Harvey acted as judge and Clarence Newly as starter, an office conferred upon him with sundry misgivings by the miners, but agreed to as he had been a liberal donor to the fund. He had with him an assistant to keep the riders in order, some of them being a trifle unruly.

Clarence hoped an accident might throw Colin out of the race, if it proved fatal so much the better; this, however, was too much to expect. It took some time to get the fourteen horses away. A dozen were at last sent off, and ten seconds later the word to go was given to Colin and Ben.

Good use had been made of their start by the others, and Colin was rather surprised at the distance they were ahead in the time.

Ben sent Black Star off at a tremendous pace ; Colin kept Maneroo in hand, riding steadily. Jack Tipton's horse, Slasher, held the lead, Bill Blower having received orders to ride him out from start to finish, so that there might be no mistakes.

"If you get messing about in the ruck you'll as likely as not be knocked over," said Jack ; "he's only a little fellow, and can't hold his own in a crowd."

There were two spills in the first mile, but no one was hurt ; the accident, however, made the others cautious.

Black Star raced into fourth place as they commenced the second round, and Maneroo followed hard after him ; Nugget was now leading and going well, and Slasher galloped freely ; some of the others were already beaten. The miners became jubilant as Nugget still held the lead, half a mile from the winning post. Many of them were on horseback, racing down the course alongside the runners, when they were left behind, shouting and urging them on.

Ned Crawley was excited ; it would be a great feat to beat Colin and Ben, the two crack riders on the station.

Madge wanted Colin to win, and eagerly watched the race, her father being amused at her enthusiasm.

The critical point was reached a couple of furlongs from home, and Nugget's lead decreased. The miners yelled, calling out to Ned to keep going. If little Nugget won it would be a great triumph for them.

Ben rode Black Star for all he was worth, but the horse seemed to have lost some of his dash ; probably the hard ride when the bush-rangers were in pursuit had told upon him, at any rate he commenced to falter. Colin was not slow to perceive this, and taking advantage of it got Maneroo level with the black, passing Bill Blower on Slasher as he did so. There was a tremendous cheer from the crowd as the Dimboola pair raced side by side, close on the heels of Nugget.

Ned Crawley, glancing round, saw them coming, and drew his whip. Nugget answered gamely, but his short stride was all against him, and inch by inch he lost ground. For a few moments Ben held his own with Colin, and the horses were locked together. It was a grand race, worthy of any course and any riders.

Madge cheered, and called out Colin's name, most of the ladies waved their handkerchiefs ; it was evident he was the favourite rider.

"I'm done," thought Ben, as Maneroo's head shot in front, but he rode Black Star desperately to hold his ground. It was a vain effort. Maneroo drew out and raced after Nugget ; when he reached the leader's quarters the noise was deafening.

The miners flung their slouch hats in the air shouting, "Nugget, Nugget, Nugget." A fainter cry came in response from the ladies, "Maneroo, Maneroo wins."

The two names challenged each other all over the course. Kenneth Harvey thought he had seldom seen a gamer little one than Nugget, and wondered where Ned Crawley had picked him up. He was not surprised to see Black Star beaten ; he expected it, considering what the

horse had gone through, but he was anxious for Maneroo to beat Nugget.

When Colin sent Maneroo up alongside Nugget, Ned Crawley became desperate, and eventually lost his head. He rode wildly, using his whip freely, all to no purpose. Maneroo's long sweeping stride soon told a tale, and gradually he drew ahead, gaining at every yard.

Colin saw he had the race in hand and let Maneroo finish at his own pace; he eventually passed the judge a couple of lengths in front of Nugget, with Black Star struggling on into third place.

"You've beaten me well," gasped Ned, as they rode back together.

"Nugget is the gamest little horse I've seen for a long time," replied Colin; "it was Maneroo's big stride did the trick."

The miners were quite satisfied the best horse had won, and cheered Colin and Maneroo heartily. They were somewhat recompensed when Fortune won the fifth race, placing two events to the credit of the Golden Lead contingent.

The same evening the stakes were paid over at the Diggers' Rest, amidst general rejoicings, and wine was freely indulged in. The healths of the victors were given and heartily drunk, then followed the officials', and numerous others.

The miners were becoming noisy. In a large tent near the Hotel a considerable number were playing cards, others throwing dice, and money changed hands rapidly. How the disturbance arose no one exactly knew, but an accusation of cheating at one card-table was put down as the cause. Anyway, a free fight started; the miners were never backward at taking sides, and two parties were speedily formed. An occasional pistol-shot was heard, and Sergeant Schaaf thought it time to interfere. Colin went with him, also Kenneth Harvey, thinking they might exercise some influence over the men.

Clarence Newly stood at the far end of the tent, and looked on the riotous scene with glowing eyes. If only Colin would enter there might be a good chance of carrying out his dastardly plot.

Not many yards away from him was Ned Crawley, who had been drinking freely, although he was sober. He noticed an evil look in Clarence Newly's face, and following the direction of his gaze saw his eyes riveted on Colin, who had just entered the tent.

"He looks more like a devil than a man," muttered Ned. "He's up to no good; I'll keep an eye on him."

Kenneth tried in vain to calm the men, Colin also shouting to them with no effect.

Sergeant Schaaf and his troopers were greeted with a volley of hard words, and told in angry tones to "mind your own business, and don't interfere."

Schaaf, however, saw danger ahead, and ordered his men to clear the tent. This was easier said than done. The confusion became worse, the uproar deafening. Men fought and struggled, revolver shots rang out, one or two miners fell to the ground.

Ned Crawley, keeping his eyes on Clarence Newly, saw him raise a revolver and point it deliberately at Colin, who stood sideways to him, and did not perceive his intention.

For a moment Ned was so surprised he thought he must be mistaken;

perhaps Clarence was aiming at some other man, or merely putting up his revolver to protect himself. A sharp report, and a bullet passing through Colin's hat, enlightened him; it was a deliberate attempt on the part of the shooter to kill him, and Ned, without a moment's hesitation, raising his weapon, fired at Clarence before he pulled the trigger again. He aimed at Clarence Newly's arm, but the bullet sped on its deadly mission and struck him in the heart; he fell forward on to his face without a cry.

In the confusion Colin fancied the bullet passing through his hat must have been fired at random. Ned's deadly shot had not been noticed in the turmoil around, and he determined to keep his secret, and let matters take their course. The conclusion would be that Clarence Newly had been accidentally killed; Ned, however, knew he had rid the world of a would-be murderer, he had no doubt about that, and the effect of his shot did not trouble him in the least. He had always regarded Clarence Newly as a bad lot, now he knew him for what he was.

Sergeant Schaaf and his men quelled the riot. When the tent was cleared, Clarence Newly was found, shot through the heart, and five miners were severely wounded; all were removed to the Diggers' Rest.

Colin was much shocked at his half-brother's death.

"You had better take possession of his effects," said Schaaf, proceeding to search the dead man.

There were keys, some money, and several letters in a small leather case. These he handed to Colin, who took them into his room.

"I wonder if there's a letter from home amongst them," he thought. He longed to see some familiar handwriting again after all these years. He opened the case; the first batch of letters were about business matters. Then he came to another that caused him intense surprise; he stared at it with wondering eyes. What could it mean? The letter was in Norah Marden's handwriting—he recognized it—and, wonder of wonders, it was addressed to him, Colin Newly. What was it doing in Clarence Newly's pocket-book? Why had she written it?

CHAPTER XXX

HOME AGAIN

WHEN Colin recovered from his surprise, on finding Norah's letter, he read it carefully and saw it was an answer to one he was supposed to have written. He quickly came to the conclusion that Clarence had written to her in his, Colin's, name, and this was her answer.

Norah's letter showed clearly that she loved Colin, and was coming out at his request, as she supposed, to marry him.

This placed Colin in an awkward fix. The prospect of meeting Norah was delightful, and to marry her was beyond his most sanguine expectations. He had no fortune, but she hinted plainly in her letter that had he been penniless, she had sufficient for both; and what gave him most satisfaction of all was her statement that she had ample proof of his innocence. He showed the letter to Kenneth Harvey, who was quite as surprised as Colin at the contents, and all they implied.

"Your half-brother must have been an out-and-out scoundrel," said Kenneth. "I wonder what he would have done had he met Miss Marden in your place, as he evidently intended? Probably he would have induced her to marry him, telling her some story as to your death. I can't say I am sorry for what has happened under the circumstances. Of course you must go and meet her, and don't forget to bring her to Dimboola. I suppose you will be married in Sydney as soon as possible after her arrival?"

"That depends upon Norah," said Colin. "I shall abide by her decision; she has been deceived by Clarence, and may not wish to marry."

Kenneth Harvey smiled; he thought when she saw Colin she would quickly make up her mind in his favour.

Madge was let into the secret of Colin's sudden departure for Sydney, and was anxious to see Norah, having had a glowing description of her many charms given her by him.

Colin reached Sydney, and awaited the arrival of the Firefly with impatience, and no small amount of anxiety.

Norah would expect to see him, but she little knew what a narrow escape she had had of falling into Clarence Newly's clutches. He must explain everything to her, read the letter Clarence had sent her, if she had it in her possession, and tell how he came to discover her reply, and his half-brother's perfidy. Colin had no doubt after this evidence that Clarence Newly was the real forger of the cheque that had caused so

much trouble, and he found it a hard matter not to think ill of the dead in consequence.

As the time approached for him to meet Norah his anxiety increased. The Firefly made a good passage, and Colin awaited her arrival on the quay with a beating heart. He wondered if Norah had changed much. She was a woman now, he a man; when he left home they had been merely boy and girl together.

The vessel berthed at the landing stage, and as she was made fast Colin scanned the faces of the passengers as they looked over the side. At last he found what he sought. He recognized her at once, as she did him, and they waved hearty greetings to each other.

No sooner was the gangway down than Colin hurried on deck, forcing his way through the crowd to the spot where Norah waited for him, near the stern, almost alone. She came forward to greet him with open arms, and a bright happy blush on her cheek, her eyes glowing with love and longing for him; she knew now she had always loved him, and this precious moment was worth waiting for.

When Colin saw her coming towards him there was no hesitation on his part; he felt his heart glow with love for this beautiful healthy woman who was giving herself to him. He clasped her in his arms, kissed her fondly, and then held her back from him and scanned her features.

"My old playmate still, Norah," he said. "You have not changed much, you are more beautiful, that is all."

She was pleased, and looked it, as she answered—

"And you, Colin. Yes, you are changed, but for the better. What a fine, good-looking, bronzed man you are! Indeed I am proud of you! I am so glad I came!"

Then followed inquiries about home, and his father and mother, to which she hastily replied.

They left the ship, and went to an hotel, where Colin had engaged rooms.

That night he told her his story, to which she listened enthralled. When he related the part Clarence Newly had played in the matter she was much agitated.

"How wicked of him!" she said. "It was the hand of Providence thwarted his base designs and sent you in his place to meet me. Whatever should I have done out here if Clarence had carried out his scheme?"

It occurred to her that Colin might have met her considering it his duty to fulfil the offer made on his behalf by Clarence, and that he did not love her. She looked at him hastily, then said—

"Colin, you must not marry me if you do not really love me, I shall feel I have obtained you under false pretences," she added with a faint attempt at a smile.

His answer and his actions reassured her; there was no doubt about his love for her, he thoroughly convinced her on that point.

It was Norah's turn to relate how Clarence had behaved towards his father, and how Sir Owen was satisfied that it was his eldest son, and not Colin, who forged the cheque.

"Your mother is very happy now," said Norah. "She urged me to undertake the journey, although I did not require much persuading."

Colin also told Norah of his experiences at Dimboola, how Madge found him almost at death's door, and of Kenneth Harvey's kindness to him. He gave her an account of Captain Donnell's escapades, and of Madge's capture by the bushrangers, and rescue by Donnell.

"I think the outlaw was a far better man than Clarence," said Norah, an opinion with which Colin agreed.

He had no difficulty in persuading Norah to marry him at once, and three days after the Firefly's arrival they were united by special license and spent a pleasant month in Sydney.

Norah refused to listen to Colin's protestations that he was not in a position to keep a wife. She said her income was more than sufficient for them, and that Sir Owen had said if Colin returned home he would find a hearty welcome awaiting him at Woolsdown, which would eventually be his property.

"We must pay a visit to Dimboola," said Colin; "and, Norah, I want you to try and persuade Mr. Harvey to go to England with us and take Madge; the trip would do them good, and I am sure every one would be delighted with them."

Norah was only too willing to undertake this pleasing task; she was impatient to see Madge, who had, she felt, saved Colin's life, and also Kenneth Harvey, who had behaved like a father to him. The journey to Dimboola interested Norah. Everything was new and strange in this vast country, so different from anything she had imagined. When they left the train at Crowhurst, and commenced the long drive in a buggy sent from Dimboola, Norah began to wonder when these almost endless plains would cease. It seemed so wild and lonely, it was difficult to believe the land was inhabited. Colin explained to her the enormous size of the stations, the huge flocks of sheep and herds of cattle, and the hundred and one things connected with a squatter's life.

Their reception at Dimboola Norah will never forget; it surpassed anything she had seen in its wild, weird aspect.

Kenneth Harvey had assembled a tribe of blacks at the station, and at night a huge fire lighted up the scene, and a savage coroboree was danced, with a fury that almost terrified the spectators. All the hands were liberally treated, and a huge wedding breakfast was organized by Julia Hope, who was in her element.

Norah and Madge quickly became fast friends; they were always together, accompanied by Koola, who, much to Madge's delight, completely recovered from his wound.

One day Madge took Norah down by the creek and pointed out to her the spot where she had found Colin lying nearly dead from exhaustion and want of food.

As Madge told her tale, with girlish sympathy, the tears stood in Norah's eyes, and when she ended she took her in her arms, kissing her fondly, thanking her over and over again for saving the man she loved.

Lady Newly's dream occurred to her, and she told Madge of it, and how wonderfully near it was to the actual truth.

"From that day," said Norah, "she always believed Colin to be alive."

Norah had a harder task than she anticipated to persuade Kenneth

Harvey to leave Dimboola for some months and take Madge for a trip to England. It was only by constant harping on the benefits and advantages Madge would derive from it that she succeeded. Ben Cridge was to be left in charge of the station, and Julia of the household affairs.

"Take my advice, Ben, and marry her," said Kenneth. "There'll be no difficulty about running the show then."

Ben promised to think it over, but said to himself—

"I'm not so sure but what Julia would manage to run the whole business herself; I don't think I'll risk it."

When Sir Owen and his wife heard of Colin's marriage with Norah, and that they were returning home with Kenneth Harvey and Madge, they were immensely pleased, and great preparations were made to give them a fitting reception at Woodsdoun.

Peter Lostock said to his wife—

"What did I tell you, Jane? I knew Clarence did it all along, and I knew Miss Norah and Master Colin would make a match of it. I'll be right glad to see him again, that I will."

When the party from Dimboola arrived at Woodsdoun the reception they received can be imagined.

Kenneth Harvey, after a six months' spell in England, was anxious to return home. With some difficulty he was persuaded to leave Madge at Woodsdoun, promising to return for her in two or three years.

Twelve months later Norah and Madge were talking over old times when the latter said—

"At Dimboola Colin was always considered to belong to me, because I found him."

Norah laughed as she said—

"But you have given him to me, have you not?"

"I suppose so," said Madge. "Anyway you need not be greedy; you have two Colins now, so you can hand over the little one to me."

"Here you are, Madge," said Norah, placing the crowing youngster in her arms, "but I expect you'll return him to his mother speedily if he cries."

THE END

